2

Decoration Disconnection Disorder

Illustration: Koyama Hirokazu (TYPE-MOON)

Kinoko Nasu

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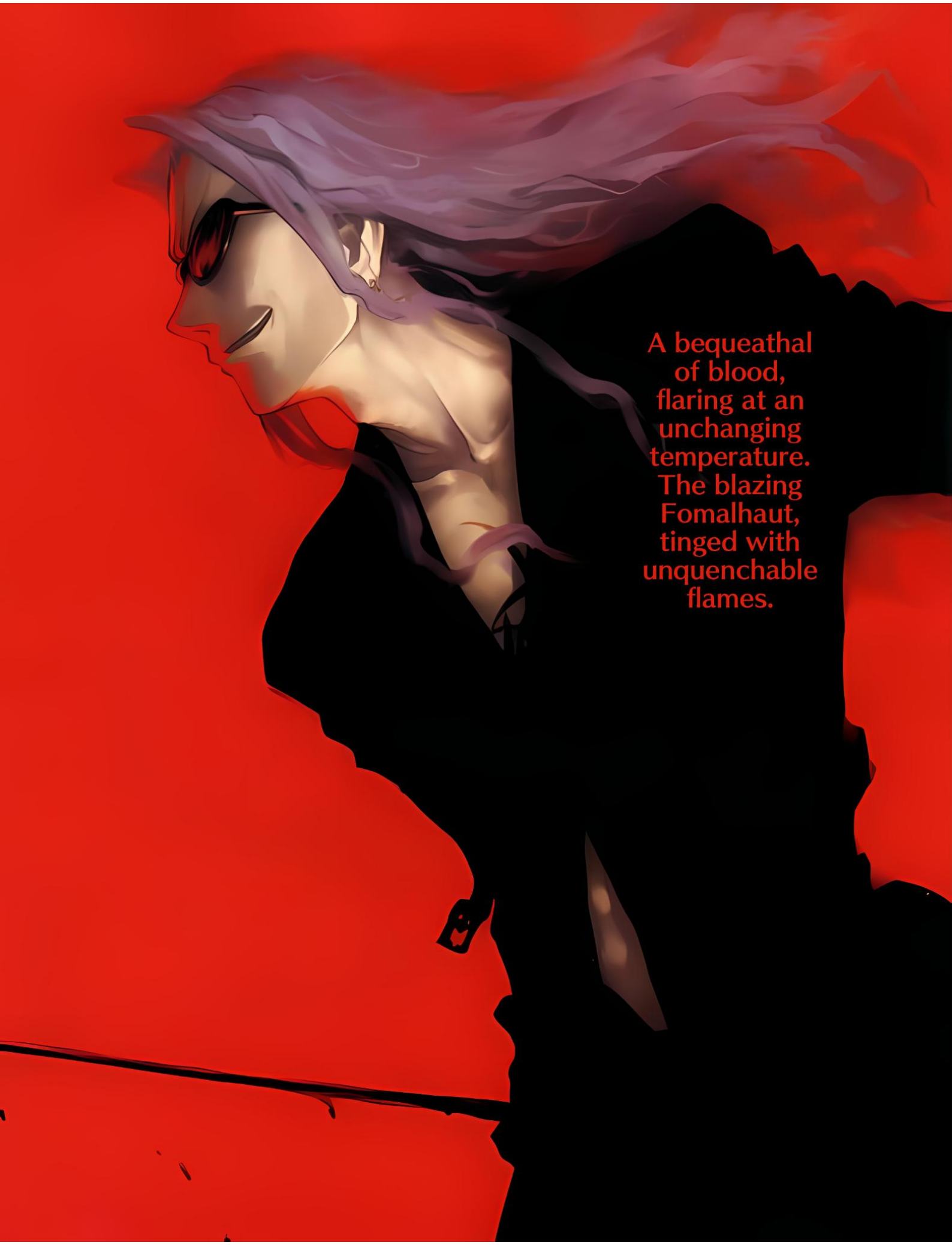
DDD 2

Decoration Disorder Disconnection

KODANSHA BOX


A bequeathal
of blood,
flaring at an
unchanging
temperature.
The blazing
Fomalhaut,
tinged with
unquenchable
flames.

I felt the blazing sun searing my skin. The scent of summer scorched my lungs with each breath.
KINOKO NASU
2
DDD
DECORATION DISORDER DISCONNECTION.
This was all that remained— a dream of an azure paradise lost to time.

1. S.VS.S-1

2. S.VS.S-2

3. /FOMALHAUT.

4. /Vt.in day dream.

Illustration/KOYAMAHIROKAZU(TYPE-MOON)
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Decoration Disorder Disconnection Volume 2

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1. S.VS.S-1

Decoration Disconnection Disorder 2

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Position. Windup.
Stride. Release. Strike.

In that instant, my entire body condensed into a single screw. No matter who the batter may be, they stood no chance of even grazing the ball. My bones, flesh, and mind had attained such a perfect harmony that I couldn't help but lose myself in ecstasy. As my hips and elbows shed what meagre semblance of humanity still remained with every repeated motion, so did a mountain of corpses continue to pile up.

I stood amidst a frying pan ablaze with euphoric cries.
I basked in their incessant cheers celebrating my triumph.
The scent of summer scorched my lungs with each breath.
The sight of a girl's head drooping as though she had been hung crossed my eyes.
Above me towered a cloudless sky, tinged in an ominously frigid shade of blue. The sky and baseball field had morphed into a lone azure cosmos.
I stood at its core by my lonesome, the same way things had always been.
I felt the blazing sun searing my skin.

"That too, shall soon come to an end," I heard someone say.

A shoddy throw that hurt to even look at.
A pitch so careless, it could never be taken back.
A fielder's choice executed so perfectly that an onlooker could hardly stifle a laugh.

I averted my eyes from the dreadful, sullied sound that pierced my ears.

At that instant.
For the first time, I heard the sound of bones—of my dreams shattering.

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Within the blink of an eye, all our plans for summer break had been ruined. Our battle had been expected to rage on until the first week of August, and yet much to the shock of everyone, it came to an abrupt close by the first day of summer.

"Gotta admit, that was one heckuva plot twist. It was so spot-on that I can't help but almost feel good about it. What did you guys think?"

I turned my head toward the pair standing behind me, but they didn't bother replying. A day had already passed after the start of summer break, and we were at Shikura Prefectural First High. The field had been bustling with life until just yesterday, but now, all that remained was stillness.

The summer sun continuously rained upon the tanned soil, while the blue sky filled my entire field of vision without any regard for my perspective. All that remained was the uniformly levelled land, stretching toward the horizon without a single person, net, or even ball to be seen within its confines.

The date was the 21st of July, and summer break had only just kicked off.

It started to seem an awful lot like it wasn't only the field that was empty but the entire school grounds. Though everyone was undoubtedly still reeling from yesterday's festivities, the place being this thoroughly abandoned was a bit overkill.

Yet there we were, capitalising on the fact that not a single soul was in sight.

"Seriously? How the hell did you manage to get the key to the back gate, Ishizue-senpai? I was so sure we'd need to scale a few fences in order to sneak in, ya know. Hold on, were you planning on taking vengeance on the school after graduating?"

"Hell no. Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't have the time nor the sort of vigilance required to pull off a stunt like that. I just never got the chance to return it, that's all. Oh, right. I've still got the clubroom key too. Wanna check it out?"

"Nah, that'd just be a waste of time. Still can't believe they actually let you get away with that, though. Was there some sort of trick? Some con to get into their good books or somethin' like that?"

"Mhm. If you really wanna know, I don't mind telling you. Seriously though, I doubt you'll ever need it. By the way, you'd better rein that monkey in before shit hits the fan, Kirisu. She might wander off into the building if you don't keep an eye on her."

"Yessir," Kirisu Yaichirou replied halfheartedly as he lumbered onward.

Indeed, what we were doing today was the textbook definition of breaking and entering. While we might've gotten away with sneaking into school grounds, there was no way they'd let us off the hook if we broke into the building itself.

"Hey, dumbass! Don't you dare move a single step!"

Kirisu lowered his large frame into a crouch and rolled his shoulder loose. His sights were set on the person attempting to cut through the grounds. That person was none other than our third accomplice, and the very genius who had come up with this whole idea, Tsuranui Mihaya.

"What the heck do you think you're doing?! Have you gotten so tired of constantly losing that you decided to charge at me head-on? Guys, I think the heat finally made this gorilla lose himself to my charms!"

"I hope you drop dead, you goddamn ape! I'd rather die than get turned on at the sight of your stupid ass!"

There I was, the bystander to this thrilling game of rugby.

After Kirisu crashed into Tsuranui with such force you'd think he could shoulder-tackle through a concrete wall, they both rolled through the ground, kicking up a small cloud of dust in their wake. Guy wasn't pulling any punches. He had barreled into her like he genuinely wanted the kill.

"Must be nice to be young. I can't even imagine moving around that much in this heat."

As for me, I felt like I was about to die just by breathing.

Wiping away my sweat with my left hand, I took refuge in the shade of a tree with a view of the entire field.

Although hiding myself from the sun's rays helped alleviate the heat slightly, the ambient temperature only rose ever further as the clock's hands continued to move past noon. My vision began to shimmer in the heat, which did nothing but make the field feel like it was slowly morphing into an actual desert.

Meanwhile, the noises coming from above, put simply, the cries of the cicadas on the tree, only served to dissociate my mind even further. While their perfectly metred chirps could earn some praise under different circumstances, right now it was pure torment. In the first place, working non-stop without a single second of rest was a clear violation of the labour law. Summer had only just begun. Weren't these guys capable of pacing things out and living a long, peaceful life?

"The hell am I even thinking? Cicadas only live a week. When you put it like that, it's no wonder they're always living like there's no tomorrow. Man, is it just me, or is this place even hotter than where we were earlier?"

I glanced back across the field, realising Tsuranui had already wriggled free of Kirisu's grasp and pinned him down in a perfect judo grapple. There were tears slowly welling up in her eyes, possibly because her new set of clothes had now been sullied with dirt. Still, the fact that she didn't take any damage from that tackle was absolutely frightening.

For what it's worth, it took me until 2006, or in other words, until everything was over, to unravel the truth. This happy-go-lucky lady I was hanging around with turned out to be the cherished daughter of a rather elite household. On top of that, I even found out that she was obsessed with the art of self-defence.

But who cares about the future? All that mattered in this moment was that the temperature peaked at thirty-five degrees on that day. The forecast hadn't predicted a single day of rain for the following week. Even though my spirits were being beat down by the merciless onslaught of the sun, one thing remained unchanged. Tsuranui's energy alone remained insusceptible to any amount of heat.

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With each passing year, summer only ever got harsher and harsher within the city.

The unending construction of new buildings steadily strangled the flow of air, while the residents of those very same buildings had their ACs ripping at full blast. Did those jackasses not know how to think? All that does is transform the entire place into a giant mirror that reflects the heat of the sun. Fantastic job making the world even hotter, geniuses.

For students like us that weren't in a position to receive the comfort of air conditioning and lacked the financial freedom to evacuate to a diner somewhere, summer was nothing short of infernal. Well, the cold winter air wasn't exactly the most comfortable thing either, which meant that all of the seasons had their own unique challenges.

That being said, for those who possessed our own homes, the only thing we had to do was coop ourselves up. But of course, it was never quite that straightforward. Our youthful spirits could never stomach wasting away our golden days like that. Oh, and our parents wouldn't allow it either.

Fathers would hurl their sons out of the house for indulging in such slothfulness. Mothers, on the other hand, would scold their daughters for spending all day glued to a screen, chatting or tinkering with their own artsy little homepages.

Thus, us young'uns who had been forced out of our homes were given no choice but to meet up with our friends and wander the city aimlessly. The reason I ended up with Tsuranui and Kirisu today was something along those lines.

"Hold up. You don't have any plans for today, Senpai?"

"Well, duh. Did you already forget I was supposed to help you two out till mid-summer? Now that my schedule's wide open, I figured I'd start hunting for a part-time job somewhere."

"Talk about lucky! How about this then? I'll buy you out for the day!"

Without any hesitation, she shoved an advance of ten thousand yen into my hands.

As much as I didn't want to take her up on it, I wasn't stupid enough to turn down such a sweet deal. And so there I was at 10:00 AM, nodding along like I'd just turned into some damn gigolo. I couldn't help but feel that I was far too young to be developing these sorts of talents.

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And so, that was the full account of how I'd gotten roped into this and wound up sneaking into school at Tsuranui's behest.

"This is crazy. Cicadas are such little freaks. Listen, they just started singing in chorus! What were they up to this whole time? Were they underground? Fighting zombies, perhaps? How're they already hustling like that when they literally just woke up? You guys are gonna put the Marines out of their jobs if you keep working that hard! Well, whatever, I adore you weirdos. If you ever come to my place, you have my permission to fuck the full pack of my brothers!"

Tsuranui couldn't hold back her excitement toward the cicadas as she sat by the shade.

"Hey, Ishizue-senpai. I wanna drink some water. Oh, not tap water. I mean mineral water. Can you go in there real quick and flex your upperclassman authority to score us some?"

Nearby sprawled Kirisu, arms akimbo on the floor as he lackadaisically swung his hand through the air.

"....."

What a pitiful sight. I couldn't imagine a sorrier trio than us.

We'd had such glorious plans for our summer vacation, and yet all of that had gone up in smoke in just a single day. Now, here we were, wasting our lives away. Oh, how cruel destiny can be. Even after sneaking into the schoolyard, all we could do was gaze at the clouds drifting through the distant sky.

Our days of restlessness had come to an end. Just as our schedules were wiped clean in an instant, so too did the expectations of every adult around us. Though its scope was confined within C Prefecture, the fervent fans in the area had been itching to watch the long-awaited showdown between the two geniuses.

"Oh, right. Koala's fourth match is today."

"Yup. They've got an ace in Komagiri, a pitcher in Iguruma who's gonna soar past high-school standards, and even Yumiya as relief. There's no way they fumble the bag. Not when they're practically a shoe-in for the district championship."

"Darn it. The only run anyone ever scored against them was our homer, huh? That pisses me off. We were so close. I wanted to see the two geniuses face off too! It'd have been the first time in our school's history."

"Don't be stupid. Koutokuin's Gondou is a monster slugger in his own right. He's crazy good with curveballs and even has the highest batting percentage this season. Well, his problem is that he ain't too great at scoring home runs."

"Ah, right. Gondou's a pretty good left-hitter, but he matches up horribly against Iguruma's pitches. He'd probably be able to pick them up if his limbs were as long as Kirisu's."

"I guess. Personally, I couldn't really care less about batters who are just good. Players who can pull off something really crazy are more my type. Y'know, like someone who hits a home run every time. Or someone who hits a comebacker every time. Or someone who hits an uncaught third strike every time. Or someone who hits a dead ball every time. Oh, by the way. Your limbs are way too long, Kirisu. It makes you look like a monkey. I kinda only realised it just now," she declared, flopping from her knees into a lazy sprawl on the ground.

She really could benefit from being more aware of the fact that she's a girl.

"Ahaha. Sorry, but I already realised the truth long ago. The truth that you ain't worthy of a single ounce of my respect, that is!"

Kirisu ignored the rest of Tsuranui's blatant delusions, taking issue with only the final unnecessary remark she slapped over the top.

"....."

Were these two born in the jungle or something? With the two of them sprawled out on the ground, I was now the odd one out. I had no choice left but to join them.

The familiar scent of dirt brushed my nose.

This place was our usual hideaway, within the shade of the trees, yet without a layer of grass protecting us. We gazed at the sky aimlessly, each of us having spent close to three years in this little sanctuary of ours.

The field may have been as boring and decrepit as ever, yet I still felt a tinge of regret burning up within my chest. Summer was much too long to be spent without a direction in mind. Until yesterday, this sweltering heat was a dear friend of ours. For people like us who revelled in our youth, the summer sky felt like it was constantly cheering us on.

Yet, I couldn't hear a single word of encouragement anymore. The field was empty because our story was already over—the credits had already rolled, and the audience had filed out. Those who grew bored of the show, those who sent us off with an applause, and even those who had gotten so invested that they shed tears.

All that remained was a small theater left to desolation.

Though everything else had gone silent, only the empty projector's mechanical sounds continued echoing endlessly.

"We've got nothing left to do, huh?"

"Mhm."

I stretched my arm and took a good look at the sky.

The cicadas continued crying as they'd done the entire time.

"Well, you guys wanna play some baseball?"

No one bothered shooting down my proposal.

A faint, awkward smile crept up on Kirisu's face as he went to go fetch our gear. He planted himself on the pitcher's mound, while I gave up the spot of batter and decided to play catcher. Instead, the promising rookie Tsuranui seized the bat. She pointed it at Kirisu with a shit-eating grin, clearly ecstatic at her shot at the plate.

"Heh. You two slackers are about to find out that there's been a third genius in Shikura all along! Bring it on, ya wrinkly old geezer! I'm gonna make you kneel before me! Oh, and you're paying for dessert," she crowed, swinging the bat around.

Kirisu's long limbs, and his towering body which measured over 180 centimetres, sent the ball hurtling toward us.

"Easy peasy!"

A high-pitched sound reverberated throughout the field. Her swing was so breathtakingly clean, it was hard to believe it came from a girl. The ball carved a perfect arc, tracing a path like a jet's contrail slicing through the sky.

Having nothing better to do, the three of us stared up, spellbound.

It was a painfully long summer.

This was all that remained—a dream of an azure paradise lost to time.

Now, it's time for a tale of youth. One where, despite the downright idiotic heat of the sun, the same fervour was nowhere to be found within the heart of man.

1 / Slugger. (Top)

It all ended with the sound of a cranium splitting open.

The game was over in an instant. A 140-kilogram bullet pierced straight through his target's skull as he tried to escape.

It wasn't the transgression of taking a life, but the intoxication of victory that restored warmth to his body. The heat seared his being with such intensity that he'd envisioned the sun pressed onto it. As he gazed upon the spinal fluid scattered across the floor, his consciousness sank to the olden depths of the past.

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I don't remember anymore. How did it all start? When did baseball become such an irreplaceable part of me?

My mom said I'd been clutching a bat as soon as my fingers could wrap around one, but I obviously don't recall any memories from that far back.

Besides, she didn't come from the sort of family that was privileged enough to enjoy things like baseball. We couldn't even afford a glove and ball.

It didn't take me long to realise that our household was worse off than the others around us. My mom tried as hard as she could, but there was no hiding it once I went to school. Even in primary school, where everyone was handed the same supplies, wealth was the only divider that could never be kept from others. If anything, a child's innocence makes them perceptive toward things like that—it means they're able to laugh things off.

Fortunately, I wasn't the only child in that kind of position within my school. We had a nearly even split between the rich and the poor. That meant I wasn't the only one in their sights. There was more to it, though; I was lucky enough for them to

soon realise there wasn't much fun to be had in picking on me. Because of that, nothing ever escalated too far.

But the fact that I was never their target meant that no one ever felt the need to protect me either.

It took me a long time to learn what friends were.

Still, that never really bothered me too much. I didn't have the time to be worrying about tiny problems like those. Our family's struggles with money were a bit more dire than the usual.

Lamenting the state of their households was a privilege only granted to those in a better position than we were. People say poverty robs one of their childhood. I would never dare to blame my mom for any of it, though. If anything, I desperately wanted to take even a fraction of her burden off her shoulders. Then again, there wasn't much a six-year-old could realistically shoulder alone. So how did I end up hooked on something as expensive as baseball, despite my upbringing?

Looking back at it now, there was no need for such a grand reason. Overemphasised traumas and life-changing memories wouldn't have done anything for me. An ordinary, commonplace reason was enough, just like how ants naturally gravitated toward sugar, or how the kids in my neighbourhood flocked toward the playground.

If I started playing baseball for no reason in particular, then that'd be much more genuine.

Right. While I'd already forgotten why I started playing, I still remembered the simple game of ball I used to play as a child.

There was a park within a complex in Nouzu. We gathered there every day we possibly could and played our clumsy ball game.

The crimson sunset. A closed space hidden away from the adults. Our game consisted of three people—a catcher, a pitcher, and a batter.

"Sup. Keep ya waiting long, Sinker?"

I was always the one waiting, while the two of them would always show up late. That was how it was every day.

I wasn't the brightest kid around, nor was I fortunate enough to be blessed with height.

But the fact that we all came from similar backgrounds made things easier. I remember when we were worried sick after someone said that baseball athletes had to hit specific nutritional requirements. We all accepted there was no way we could actually get our hands on those kinds of nutrients, and simply laughed it off.

Scrounging whatever meagre pieces of knowledge we each had together, we practiced until dusk in an attempt to improve our skills.

Yet those days didn't last forever.

Sometimes, we'd go to watch Little League matches. One day, we met a coach who was kind enough to invite us to his practice sessions from the next day onward. None of us could hold back our glee as we headed back home. Our lives had reached their respective peaks far too early. We believed that tomorrow would be another day filled with hope, that everything would continue going on without a single hitch just like the day before. Yet ultimately, a single year was all it took for our days of bliss to meet their end.

A discrepancy in talent, and the widening gap in our capabilities. They were once my closest friends, yet before I knew it, their glances had started to fill with resentment.

"There's no fun in it if we can't get any better," I remember hearing one of them say. But baseball was all I had back then. There was nowhere else I belonged but on the field.

It wasn't as though they were the only ones who had such fears. I was scared of being left behind too. If they were really my teammates, then why were they trying to hold me back from aiming higher?

I couldn't afford to lose.

I couldn't afford to let anyone hit my pitch.

That was why… I ended up wishing for that.

The crimson sunset. The same park where the three of us always played.

"I shall grant each of your deepest desires," the stranger remarked with a gentle smile on his face.

"I want all of my swings to be a home run!"
"I want a pitch that no batter in the world can hit!"

The man—the devil with a hat on his head—laughed.

That moment marked the end of our golden days.

From then on, baseball was no longer the noble pursuit it had once been. While the details escape me now, people inevitably accumulate countless dreams as life goes on. For me, however, only two truly mattered. And yet, because of my own shortsightedness, I ended up losing one of them forever.

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The sight of spinal fluid across the floor.

As the scent of blood wafted through the air, he gradually clawed back his lost sanity. He spent a mere minute wandering adrift within those painful memories.

It was now twelve o'clock, midnight. This was his first target—he figured it'd serve as a form of rehab. Alas, the corpse on the floor proved to be a fraud who could never hope to match up to him.

An overweight body, paired with that complacent mindset of his. His skills had taken a sharp nosedive from his prime.

The only things worthy of admiration were his top-of-the-line bat and shoes, an empty relic of his past glory.

He felt neither remorse nor reluctance toward bashing the skull of a man who was begging for his life. On the contrary, the act of finishing the man off had helped bring him back to a more reasonable mental state.

Exterminating pests was child's play compared to this.

People love to claim that they do such things in order to protect the environment, but that's nothing more than an excuse. All that truly exists is utter, absolute revulsion for those hideous creatures. His motivation, however, was something else entirely. His sole impetus was his unbridled rage. His anger had propelled the weapon into the man's skull.

"What a sick joke," a murmur of self-deprecation escaped from his chapped lips.

He retrieved his ball from what remained of the man's splintered cranium. The cowhide exterior had been completely singed away by the flames, leaving only the yarn and thread within its interior exposed. Examining it, he realised that two was the maximum number of times he could modify a ball.

He heaved a deep sigh, though not out of fatigue.

The only reason he felt compelled to do so was the biting cold. The moment he exhaled, his breath began to frost up.

Clutching his trembling body, he rifled through the corpse until he found a yellow device.

The crime scene was a relatively quiet stretch of highway. Unfortunately for him, though, a convenience store stood nearby. It was only a matter of time before the body would inevitably be discovered. He held no particular aversion to being witnessed at the scene, but he figured creating too much of a ruckus could serve to bite him in the back later. Shivering from the cold, he escaped into the darkness, ball in hand.

It was a terribly hot summer night.

Within the batter's box illuminated by the streetlights, only the ravaged corpse of a man gripping his bat remained.

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As with the previous years before it, this year's summer was dreadfully hot. The temperature rocketed up to thirty-eight degrees for days on end, with cheerful sun marks clogging the weather forecast for the entire week ahead. The city seemed as though it was on the verge of melting. Needless to say, the same went for its residents.

August 6th, 2004. Shikura City, C Prefecture.

The month of Ishizue Arika's discharge from Origa Memorial Hospital proved to be rife with juvenile crimes in Shikura.

The emergence of a teenage ring pushing illegal drugs under Ishizue Arika's name. The suicide of the man at its centre, Hisaori Shinya. The disappearance of Hisaori Makina, a patient of Agonist Disorder who was misidentified as the culprit behind Shinya's death. And finally, the ever-growing friction among the residents of the Nouzu Industrial Complex over the city's law enforcement and the year-over-year spike in crimes committed by Agonist Disorder patients. But that was really just the tip of the iceberg. The scope of the street performances held by juveniles in their late teens was only growing larger and larger. To top it all off, one such performance was believed to have led to a murder.

Enumerating every single problem that plagued the city seemed to be a futile task.

Even so, most people simply resigned themselves to their fates, never acknowledging how dire things had truly become. After all, within this summer heat, every single breath felt like it threatened to burn their organs from the inside. The city and its residents had been withered to the bone. They were desperate for anything that could quench their desiccated existence.

"Wait. Leaving already, Arishima?"

This scene was but another extension of that.

Compared to the boiling daytime, the night felt almost tepid in comparison. The scene was a measly park situated in a roundabout just by the station. The basketball court, surrounded by fences, was brimming with lights and the energy of its spectators.

It had been just about two years since this park was constructed. The green court had always been empty even during the midst of day, yet now, despite it being nighttime, it was filled with the fervour and cheers of a summer festival.

"Oh, c'mon. It's only ten. At least keep me company until the last train. 'Sides, today's opponent might put up a good fight."

"Sorry, but I can't. The place I've been crashing at's got a real strict curfew. They're gonna throw me out if I don't get back before midnight."

In response to her insincere yet cordial voice, Arishima Shougo simply shrugged his shoulders.

He had just turned nineteen and had no stable form of employment. Measuring in at 183 centimetres, he weighed 95 kilograms. Even though he was blessed with height, the fact that he still had some excess fat remaining in his body made him appear larger than he was tall.

That being said, it wasn't because he lacked the discipline needed for such things. While there was some flesh he hadn't shed completely yet, the fat remaining was something he'd intentionally held onto. His build was one commonly seen among athletes, with a focus on internal muscles rather than the ones visible to plain sight.

"What a bore. There are more people than usual tonight, y'know? You'd be a huge hit if you turned up. Show the newcomers what you're made of and give 'em a real good swing!"

The girl treated him as though he were some sort of cash cow. Then again, she was brazen enough to not pretend otherwise. If anything, the fact that she counted on him so openly was warming in its own way.

With his large build and brusque personality, people often feared Shougo's intimidating appearance. Contrary to that, however, Shougo was quite the pacifist. In other words, a typical goody-two-shoes. Though that naïveté often became the subject of his friends' ire, he was also respected for his ability to play the mood maker.

Arishima Shougo chose a similar path to the other youngsters gathered in the park.

Rather than chaining himself to full-time employment after high school, he had embraced the life of a drifter, determined to enjoy this fleeting era of freedom. Society

was quick to brand him a dropout or a loser, but the future was tomorrow's problem—the sort of idle talk best left to those with the luxury of caring. It wasn't as if he planned to dodge the consequences of his reckless, aimless youth. He fully intended to pay his dues eventually. Just let me drink my fill of the expensive liquor for now, and I'll settle the tab when the time comes. That was his thought process.

Because of that, he considered the girl standing before him and the rest of the attendees that gathered in the park to be his comrades. The unavoidable fact that some of the people involved weren't exactly the most upstanding citizens was something he had already accepted.

"Listen up, folks. It's about time we stop lazin' around and use our energy for something more productive. I've got the perfect idea. It'll be a simple game, but with just the right amount of fun. That ain't just it, though. The best part is, it'll put some much-needed stacks of cash in our wallets."

Their boss, the man whom the neighbourhood youngsters looked up to like an older brother, was the one behind this proposal.

It'd entertain them while keeping them fed. What better game could there possibly be? Recently, the money involved had begun drawing even more people in. That signified a rise of troublemakers among both the spectators and players.

Regardless, that wasn't enough to change the nature of their game. This court was, and would continue to be, a paradise for people of Shougo's kind. His playstyle was a bit more old-fashioned compared to others—he'd always prioritised his record over making money.

"No can do. Besides, I wouldn't want to end up in the centre of the limelight."

"Oh, c'mon. Are you being for real right now? The rest of the team might not be able to win without you. This ain't fair at all. I refuse to spend my money on a bet that might not pay out."

She latched onto his arm in irritation.

Without him, the next match would practically be an even game. The fact that the mere probability of losing existed was enough to upset her.

"How many times do I have to tell you? Let go of me already. I'm heading over earlier tomorrow. Depending on who the rival is, I might consider pitching in. This

might be a good chance for you, Nanami. Why don't you sit back and just enjoy the game? It can be pretty fun if you pay attention, y'know."

"Man, what a turn-off. Where else am I supposed to rip off cash to burn tomorrow? Ugh, if it wasn't for the payout, I'd never even bother watching something this lame. Seriously, I have no idea why you guys are so into it. It's like watching a buncha kids. What's there to get all heated up about?"

"You ain't wrong. Baseball's turned into a pleasure reserved for the grown-ups now."

He grabbed her arm in return, his forcefulness causing his grip to dig into her skin.

"Hey, cut it out! You're hurting me!"

"I'm sorry, I really am. But you've gotta understand. Saying things like that here is practically asking for it. The guys joining tonight's SvS are some real baseball freaks. They'd throw you in a karaoke box for a week if they heard that."

"Ah, um, right. I guess you have a point. I'm sorry, okay? Please don't get upset."

Her face immediately began to grow pale. She was only in her third year of high school, yet it seemed as though she'd already caught wind of it somewhere.

The rumours had circulated to the point that it had become a sort of urban legend. Those who mouthed off about the game would be dragged to an unknown karaoke box and subjected to the culprit's heinous lessons without anyone else being aware of it.

"Don't sweat it. I'll see you tomorrow."

He had no intention of frightening her. Replying in a light-hearted tone in an attempt to comfort her, he hoisted the bag holding his gear back over his shoulder and walked off.

Past the avenue filled with stores stretching all the way to the station lay a dim community of houses.

It was now slightly past ten in the evening. He hadn't passed by a single car, let alone a single passerby on his way to Shikura Hills Block 2.

With its superficial countryside feel, Shikura Hills was the common choice among old-timers. Once the clock struck ten, the city-operated bus would only run twice an hour, meaning responsible students and labourers made sure they were already home by then.

Leaving that aside, anyone in their right mind would've chosen to remain indoors on such a hot night.

A deep silence filled the area.

Even though the streets were cut with wide lanes, the total absence of traffic made them look like a pointless investment. The streetlights resting by the lanes seemed awfully bright tonight, giving the same impression as a lamp used in a nighttime ball game. The gently sloping road wound upward, making it the perfect spot for a head-to-head match.

With his wooden bat secured within his bag, Arishima Shougo walked silently through the streets.

Despite his earlier claims, the truth was that he'd wanted to get in at least one game tonight. No, that wasn't right. His curfew was just an excuse. If he could've played every single day, he would have. SvS was created as a mechanism to save people like Shougo. A year had passed since everything first started. He'd changed so dramatically since then that remembering the days he'd spent drifting aimlessly sent a shiver down his spine.

As corny as it sounded, he had begun to feel purpose in his everyday life. He'd taken up running again, started actually applying sports science to maintain his health. At long last, his mind had clawed its way back toward his prime. Until recently, some cheap drugs were making their way around town, but Shougo didn't have even the slightest interest in such pleasures. Truth was, he'd already found a high that lit his brain up better than anything could long ago.

The only reason he refused to play tonight was because he wanted to refrain from giving up any information to tomorrow's opponents.

Today marked the unforeseen defeat of Koutokuin Academy in C Prefecture, a frontrunner for the District Preliminary Championship. Same as last year, this summer also proved to be one that defied expectations.

Unfortunately, mere words such as those would never be able to satisfy the players in question. Losing on the field put an unimaginable amount of strain on them.

They'd spent years pouring their youth into a single sport, only to watch it crumble to dust right before their eyes.

No one in the world would be able to shake off such heartbreak in an instant.

In fact, several team members from neighbouring cities had shown up in Shikura to catch the game. Though they'd harboured interest from the get-go, they now needed something else to satisfy them after dropping out of the tournament.

"There they go, playing with fire just 'cause their high-school baseball days are dead and buried. Sure, they're from some bigshot schools, but that doesn't make all of 'em saints. Well, not that I'm one to talk. We didn't make it out of the top four back when I was in Koala either."

This SvS was going to be special. The prize money had swollen into a figure nobody'd ever seen before, all in response to the wave of the ongoing Summer Koshien. Students from prestigious sporting schools tended to have an aversion toward so-called delinquents, but SvS had a way of scrubbing that away.

It was precisely because he was set on taking down those incoming players himself that Shougo dodged any unsanctioned matches that might put him on someone else's radar.

He only played against those who possessed cellphones with mobile numbers, in other words, officially recognised participants. As someone directly involved with the founding of the game, he felt a strong responsibility toward his seniors to place within the top three once more.

"I gotta at least make some adjustments before the match. Man, if only there were some solid batting-practice pitchers out there."

The night breeze coiled itself to his skin. Unbothered by the sweat slicking his back as he walked, he drifted into memories of the matches he'd left behind.

The first sound that came to his mind was that of his teammates rowdily cheering. Inside the park nestled in the heart of several buildings, they'd set up a row of lights for the game.

Perhaps it was because they were too bright.

As he began to rekindle the fire of his life again, he'd lost the instinct to sniff out danger in exchange for patching up his battered spirit.

There was one more fatal mistake he made, however. He lacked the vigilance to pore over the rumours he'd started hearing a few days ago.

A washed-out summer dream now threatened to strip him of both his sense of danger and his displeasure toward the heat.

He'd always said he would pay the tab when his time came.

Much to his misfortune, that time was now.

"Hey. You a batter?"

Under a streetlight three metres from where he stood, a lone phantom flickering within the heat slowly took form.

His punishment was delivered under the name of Sinker. Or at least, that was the moniker this murderer would earn after a few more matches.

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He was at a loss for words.

After all, a phantom of the past now stood before his eyes.

Summer had always been the season for ghost stories, yet the figure washed in the streetlight's glow was much too bizarre to comprehend.

The mysterious onlooker's body reeked of dirt and sweat, with clothes sporadically riddled with tears. Despite their left arm being fully exposed, a long sleeve swallowed their right arm all the way down to the palm. In addition, their hood served to obscure any of their features completely. One could hardly imagine a more peculiar sight to come across on a night like this.

"C'mon, answer me. You're an SvS batter, right?"

The phantom spoke with a muffled, husky voice.

While his face may have been concealed by his hood, his voice was enough to give away his gender. The tone of his voice gave the impression of an old man, but a single glance at his frame informed Shougo they were about the same age.

Then again, Shougo found himself more preoccupied with the man's exposed left arm than with his inexplicable appearance. After neglecting his upkeep for close to four months, Shougo's physique could now only be compared to a layman's. Yet, this man's left arm was that of a hardened athlete. A single glance was enough to measure how much dedication he'd invested into building it up.

Though his attire gave off the impression of a vagrant, there was clearly more to him than met the eyes.

Shougo was now convinced that the hooded man was a fellow player, and one most could never dream of measuring up to, at that. He'd seen that kind of build before back in high school, on elite athletes who had forged their entire bodies into specialised tools, built solely for pitching or batting.

"Why so silent, Arishima Shougo? I've got the right guy, no? They ain't anywhere near what they once were, but I can tell you've been working on rebuilding your legs and back. Pretty solid job, honestly. Didn't think a useless piece of shit like you could bounce back that much in just a couple months."

The man scoffed as if fighting off a cough, white breath escaping from between his lips.

For some inexplicable reason, he couldn't stop shivering. In the midst of a heat tantamount to a steam bath, not even a hood was enough to keep the man warm.

"What… what the hell is wrong with you?"

He found himself in a perilous situation, akin to running into an armed crook when going out to a convenience store at midnight. Now was his last chance to turn back. It took him much too long to comprehend the danger he'd found himself in, but it wasn't too late yet. Fortunately, there was still three metres worth of space separating them. All he had to do was turn around and make a break for it as fast as he could.

"Chill out. I only came here 'cause I wanted to challenge you. All you gotta do is say yes. Besides, you're only gonna end up dying if you try to run away. Can't get any more boring and pointless than that. Ain't that right, third-rate? Since you're not

getting outta this alive either way, might as well enjoy your final moments in a match against me."

The hooded man's voice was scarce with emotion. No, it was almost as if he'd lost the capability to express emotion completely.

His husky voice gave off the impression that he was exhilarated, composed, and elated all at the same time. No one else but him could possibly make out what emotions lied within. But there was one more possibility. Perhaps it was anger that lied beneath every other emotion.

At that moment, Shougo remembered another rumour he hadn't paid heed to.

A few days ago, one of the game's participants was found dead. Apparently, he was found on a deserted stretch of highway, much like where Shougo was right now.

The cause of his death was a blow to the back of the head; a cerebral contusion stemming from the destruction of his skull via a baseball-sized object. He'd apparently survived for two hours after, but no one was there to help him until a local discovered his body early in the morning.

It was no wonder things ended up like that. A participant was murdered with an object that could be taken as a baseball.

That was more than enough reason for rumours to make their rounds.

That a devil had burrowed its way into SvS, seemingly motivated by the ungodly amount of prize money. For example, a kuchi-sake onna you'd hear of in the olden times. Or perhaps likening him to the Aka Manto would be more apt. In order to remain triumphant until the very end, the man had allowed himself to be possessed by a devil. He would reveal himself to unsuspecting batters and challenge them to a deathmatch.

Those who refused would be killed on the spot, yet those who agreed would meet a similar end after striking out. There was only one way to survive. Send the pitcher's ball back and beat him in a game of SvS.

"Are you really... him?"

Pulling his body back, Shougo looked the monster straight in the eye. To his own surprise, his voice didn't waver in the slightest.

Whether his opponent was the real thing or not, whether the rumours were just baseless accusations or not, didn't matter to him. Because in the end, neither of those were enough to instil fear into him. At least, that was what Shougo's instincts as a batter were telling him.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Word on the street is, some pitcher's been going around killing people lately. They've been saying it's the work of some Possessed sicko. He butchers anyone who strikes out against him and feasts on the bones of anybody who lays eyes on him. Well, not that I really give a shit, though. Take it that's your doing?"

"Guess so. Can't deny that I've made a deal with a devil. Besides, I don't see how it could be anyone else but me."

Shougo set his bag down, fishing his wooden bat free and levelling it at the hooded man like a blade.

"Just one more thing. Does that mean you'll leave me alone if I win?"

The anxiety that had set in moments ago was already gone.

Analysing a pitcher's abilities in a split second was an indispensable skill for any batter worth their salt. But more than that, the instant his fingers coiled around the bat's handle, Shougo's mindset had shifted into that of a soldier venturing into a warzone. Nothing would be able to sway him. The many years batters spent training themselves was precisely for this reason.

"Colour me surprised. Honestly figured I'd have to resort to force after the first guy. So that means you're taking my challenge?"

"Bring it on. I ain't about to roll over and die just 'cause my opponent's a murderer. Besides, there's no way in hell I'm losing to you anyway. One last thing before we start. Do you have a phone on you?"

The hooded man retrieved a silver cell phone from his pocket. That served as proof he'd been registered as an official player on the pitcher side. As a batter, Shougo had instead been issued a golden handset.

SvS, a one-box game, revolved around acquiring as many of the eighteen phones circulating among players as possible. Those who won were granted the right to take

their opponent's phones. Players would be disqualified upon losing their phones, with the game ending once one side ran out of players.

Whichever team held the higher phone count at that point was deemed the victor, while the player who possessed the most phones was granted the MVP prize.

Official matches were only held once a month, while individual matches were conducted in a form akin to a battle royale in between. That was the true form of the paradise the youngsters of this town had created.

The players in the park were stand-ins. Fodder who had to claw their way up through those games to earn entry into an official match and prove their worth.

Shougo's phone was a golden three, while the hooded man's a silver ace. As hard as it was to believe, it appeared as though he had waltzed right into a gathering of pitchers and walked away with one of their phones.

Whether they simply weren't aware that he suffered from Agonist Disorder, or whether he became a Possessed after joining the game, however, remained to be seen. Ultimately, such curiosities were of no importance to Shougo. Having lived an aimless life away from the track set for him by society, he'd slowly begun losing his aversion toward violence and crime.

In that sense, he was just another outcast possessed by the wiles of SvS.

"At last. Finally, a worthy opponent."

Shougo was convinced he would emerge victorious.

His opponent was a mere 170 centimetres tall, suggesting a pitch velocity somewhere near 110 to 120 kilometres per hour. That slight frame hinted at a reliance on curveballs. In SvS, merely making contact with the pitch signified victory for the batter, which gave Shougo every reason to believe he could settle this in a single swing. There was no reason for him to possibly fear this murderer. All he had to do was send his pitch back and take him out of the game, just as the rumours said.

Even if the man broke his word and came at Shougo physically, all Shougo would have to do was to knock him out. His physique could never measure up to

Shougo's in a fight, and even if things took a turn for the worse, the bat in his hands was more than adequate insurance.

Though he felt sympathy for the fellow batter who'd already fallen victim, he also understood there were countless ways to neutralise the threat once its nature was recognised. Shougo was no scrawny bookworm—he was a battle-hardened athlete himself. He had full confidence in his capabilities, and his opponent's weapon was one he was intimately familiar with. He understood instinctually that there was nothing to fear.

"You good with the normal rules? The lighting makes things a bit more favourable for your side. Sorry, but I'm standing nineteen metres away. You got enough balls on you? We don't have anyone to play catcher or umpire. Any balls that end up flying off ain't coming back."

He took his gloves out of his bag and passed his fingers through them.

Gripping the bat in his hands, he quickly rotated his shoulders.

It was a sort of ritual, a form of conditioning for him. This allowed him to focus the entirety of his being unto the match at hand.

His opponent was a pitcher capable of taking human lives. Only Shougo himself knew how much credence he truly afforded those stories, but the fact that he could devote himself entirely even now marked him as a clear social outlier. Still, the undeniable truth was that his pedigree as a batter was worthy of praise.

"I like the attitude. It's a shame you're gonna have to die so soon, Arishima."

"The fuck did you just say?"

The hooded man smiled in glee.

The flat, lifeless tone he'd worn earlier had vanished completely. Now, he spoke with gratitude in his voice, thanking Shougo for entertaining him. Shougo's brazen impudence, his pride and conceit as a batter. The man chuckled in open delight, as though he'd found everything he had been looking for in an opponent.

His frosted breaths and trembling body.

Beneath the edge of the hood, Shougo caught sight of a single vertical scar splitting the man's chapped lips.

"Wha—?"

That sight began to rouse something from within his memories, but he decided to leave it for another time.

Like a moth drawn to flame, he casually strolled toward the final turn of his life.

◆

The sense of unease reached its peak when they arrived at their positions within the box, delineated by white lines.

The pitcher's mound had no plate to stand on, let alone any elevation or dirt.

The moment he stepped onto the makeshift field, Shougo began to feel goosebumps all around his body.

He felt the back of his neck tingling with numbness, but not because of the burning heat of summer.

A fanatical yet unadulterated bloodlust radiated from the eyes of the man standing nineteen metres away. An inexperienced batter may have fled in fear of such a sight. There was no doubting the fact that his opponent was a bloodthirsty murderer anymore.

In a cruel twist of fate, it wasn't until he set foot upon the gallows that Arishima Shougo first felt fear for his life claw at his heart.

However, only a mere second later, everything was blown away by the shock of an entirely different impact.

◆

In baseball, a high-speed pitch can also be referred to as a smoke ball.

The origin of the term stems from players likening a ball to smoke due to it being too fast to capture with the naked eye. And just as its roots suggest, for the first time in his life, Shougo would come face-to-face with a ball his eyes simply couldn't register. He had let innumerable pitches slip past him over the years, yet not once had there been a single ball he'd truly been unable to see.

"Wait... what?"

His shoulders tensed with a creeping anxiety.

It was of utmost importance that he shook himself loose and aligned himself with the rhythm of the next pitch; nevertheless, his body seized up like a stone. He struggled to concentrate on the pitcher's movements, only nineteen metres separating them.

No, to be more exact, his breathing grew more laboured the deeper he tried to focus. His vision blurred, with the core of his being bleached in pure white by something beyond his comprehension.

There may not have been a plate, but the pitcher unmistakably stood firmly on his mound.

It was clear how he was gripping the ball, since he didn't even have a mitt. The fact that he had both of his arms positioned by his navel instead of winding one of his arms up made it easy to foresee his pitch.

It was clearly the textbook position for a right-handed sidearm.

With his height in mind, the maximum speed attainable should've been 120 kilometres per hour. The sidearm thrown might have made it look 10 kilometres per hour faster, but that was still comfortably within Shougo's range. Such a speed was nowhere near fast enough for his eyes to overlook.

Beginners are often taught to use the first pitch as a chance to examine the pitcher properly, but such advice normally only applied to batters who took a while to get running. As long as one possessed sharp enough eyes and had enough skill with the bat, there was no problem with trying to hit the ball from the start.

For example, the genius batter who was in Shikura until a year ago was a slugger known for hitting the ball all the way to the stands on the first pitch. While Shougo lacked the same overwhelming prowess of that prodigy, said to perform beyond even high-school calibre, he was nevertheless a skilled batter who boasted excellent coordination. Always going in for the kill on the first pitch, he never elected to patiently observe the opponent.

But now, the hooded man had initiated the windup for his next pitch. He raised his left leg, utilising his other as a fulcrum. Observing that motion alone was enough

to gauge the true measure of his opponent's capacities. He understood that his insight was capable of measuring up to even the genius slugger's.

That was his pride as an athlete that once pushed the aforementioned genius all the way back to third batter. Yet, right now, all of his experience was only telling him one single thing.

Only despair awaits you. You won't make contact with a single one of his pitches.

"Hold o—"

There were no time-outs in this game. When he set foot within the box, he'd already lost his chance to turn back.

The next pitch was about to begin.

It was a breathtaking, fluid motion, an overhead windup with his left leg driving sharp through the motion.

His knees and toes were pointed directly toward Shougo, as though they were arrows ready to pierce through their prey.

Generating torque with his rear instead of his leg and channelling it forward, he stamped the entirety of his left foot forcefully to the ground.

A single shift of balance would be all that it'd take to release all of the power he had built up.

A horizontal rotation to adjust his slanted body.

A flow of energy only made possible by the firm support of his foot. From his ankles to his hips. His hips to his shoulders. His elbows to his wrists. The energy he stored up accelerated with every single transmission until it finally bled into his fingertips.

It was like witnessing a humanoid slingshot.

In the next instant, the white ball was launched from his right arm. 0.46 seconds was all it took to hit the strike zone. Measuring about 140 kilometres per hour, only a professional would be capable of pitching a sidearm at this speed. However, the problem was not the unimaginable speed behind the ball. For despite being hurled at such a velocity, the ball had curved in mid-air.

The first strike came from right beside him.

Anyone watching could tell it was supposed to end up as a wild pitch. Yet somehow, it curved to Shougo's right and blew past him before arcing backward and into the strike zone. For a left-hitter like him, the right shoulder, where his bat rested, was an utter blind spot. When viewed from above, the trajectory of the ball would mirror that of a less-than symbol "<".

However, such an act was *beyond* impossible.

While his pitch could technically be classified as a shootball, the manner in which it curved like a boomerang pushed it beyond the limits of any imaginable breaking ball.

The trajectory of a ball is governed by the way it responds to air resistance, or in other words, the direction and amount of its revolutions. To be more specific, the air currents and friction created by those revolutions are what influences its spin. By that logic, no pitch thrown by human hands could ever be capable of cutting so sharply. That could only mean…

"What a shame. You're actually a half-decent batter."

The hooded monster proceeded to retrieve a second ball from his pocket.

At the same time, his right arm, still obscured by his sleeve, writhed around as though it had a life of its own.

Up until this moment, Arishima Shougo hadn't comprehended the full scope of the situation. He'd been told that Possession was a form of mental illness, and that it was only the mind that could be led astray by its influence. Because he'd never encountered a genuine Possessed prior to this day, he hadn't realised their reach extended to every inch of the human body.

"Everything about you screams half-assed. Your body, your mind, and even your movements. You've trapped yourself within the confines of common sense. Seriously, you're gonna put me to sleep. You ordinary folks are just so damn boring."

Put simply, his pitch was neither a fastball nor a breaking ball. It was a devil's ball, in the most literal sense of the phrase.

"Hey… what the hell was that?!"

At this point, Shougo's voice finally began to quiver with fear.

Once he realised how this game would end, the fear began to set in, washing his entire consciousness down to a blank slate.

He would die if he couldn't hit the ball. Weren't those the terms they had agreed upon?

"Stop! I'm telling you to stop, goddamnit!"

His opponent began to twist his body.

It was time for the second pitch to begin. A shootball was only a nightmare in name.

Even as nausea churned within him, he squared up to mirror the delivery. Just as the man said, Arishima Shougo's skills as a batter commanded respect.

Though his bat failed to even graze the breaking ball ripping through at over 140 kilometres per hour, his attempt to follow the shot as it entered his blind spot was testament to his undeniable proficiency.

"Shit! None of this makes any fucking sense!"

After the second pitch, his mental state continued its steady slide down to its breaking point.

In addition to the ball's indecipherable trajectory, it'd now gotten even faster than the first pitch. When the game started, he had full confidence in his ability to thwart the murderer, even if he resorted to deadballs and beanballs. After all, he'd never encountered a pitch he couldn't even follow with his eyes prior to today.

However, things were different now. He now understood that he had no chance of even perceiving the ball. Had that breaking ball been aimed at his head, he would've been dead before he could even register what had happened. He didn't even want to think about the possibility of colliding with a ball hurled at over 140 kilometres per hour in a game without helmets. He had gotten overconfident. Had it not been he himself who'd believed that the skill of an athlete couldn't be judged solely by their appearances?

"Come on, man! You've gotta be shitting me!"

His entire body slicked with sweat in an instant.

The years of harsh training he endured over the years helped him develop a resistance to heat. This sweat was a scream of his body, a response to the shiver running down his spine.

"Tch. What a letdown."

Even as Shougo understood that he had been made the subject of ridicule, he couldn't bring himself to muster a rebuttal. The gap between them was much too insurmountable. He hadn't earned the right to feel even the slightest bit of anger toward the pitcher's words of derision.

However, that was only how it seemed to Shougo.

The truth was, the object of the hooded man's ire was himself. Even after pitching such a perfect breaking ball, all the man could do was scoff at how far he'd fallen.

Since he knew better than anyone else what he was once capable of, he could never bring himself to accept such a pathetic pitch.

The devil's pitcher gently placed the third ball into his hands.

There were no timeouts in SvS. Once the game started, no one could leave the box until it was over. Stepping out meant automatic disqualification. In this case, those very same rules almost certainly applied. The second he tried to escape, the devil's bullet would punch clean through the back of his unguarded skull. At this moment, it finally clicked that the first victim had died trying to escape.

"B-But how?! It's impossible!"

If escape was off the table, then the only choice was to hit the ball. The man known as Arishima Shougo was already cracking under the strain. Nevertheless, the mindset he'd tempered over a decade at the plate compelled him to square his stance once more.

Hit it. That's all you have to do. You've seen everything you need to. His form, his speed, his style. Just hit it. This isn't a real game of baseball anyway. Hitting the ball in any way is enough for me to win.

“Seriously, man? You’re forming a wall on your right, Arishima,” the pitcher mocked as he studied Shougo’s decaying stance.

Once again, his right hand commenced the same slithering motion. A crimson smear bloomed on the ball’s white surface, as though a red droplet had fallen onto a patch of snow.

“Wait… is that?”

When did he end up with that injury? Or perhaps, was that the price of driving a pitch past the ceiling of human comprehension? Whichever it was, blood was trickling down his right arm.

Within baseball, manipulating the ball in any form constituted an infringement. There were many illegal deliveries that were officially banned in baseball. A shineball, which involved using a file to polish the ball, a spitball, which used the pitcher’s saliva, along with multiple other balls that modified the amount of rotations a player’s fingers could apply to a pitch. This was considered a blatant act of disrespect to the batters, who predicted the ball’s trajectory by observing the pitcher’s grip, and was even frowned upon by players who participated solely for the sake of earning money. But then, what would that make this devil’s ball? No, in the first place, would blood even count as a violation of the rules?

There was no way anyone could throw a proper pitch with a ball drenched in blood. In the same way batting required a transmission of power between joints, pitching was an uninterrupted motion that began with stomping a foot forward and ended with releasing the ball from the pitcher’s fingertips. The slightest discomfort, a split second of hesitation, or even a subtle difference in form could easily lead to a wild pitch. And within those, the most delicate part of that chain was the feel of the ball within one’s fingers.

There was no doubt about it. No human pitcher could throw even a straight in that condition.

“Y-You…”

Shougo believed he had the grounds to call the match off. No time-out was needed. However, the instant Shougo attempted to point out his opponent’s foul, his mind was wiped blank.

A wounded right arm. A blood-soaked ball. The same piercing bloodlust that he vaguely recalled. The memories resting within him had stirred awake. Right, this pitch was a...

"Hey, three-hole. Better hit this next one if you wanna walk outta here alive."

He was getting ready to throw his next pitch.

It was too late to stop the game now. All Shougo could do was swing. He focused his entire being on that singular act.

As he grasped his opponent's form, he steadied the rhythm of his breathing in preparation. Matching the timing would be simple enough. If he could align his bat with the ball's trajectory, the game would be his.

"...Ah."

Unfortunately, that proved to be impossible.

The hooded man had now assumed a completely different form. He positioned his arm even lower than the earlier sidearm, angling himself as though he were crawling on the ground. It was a submarine, a pitch rarely utilised due to its difficulty to execute and the burden it placed on a pitcher's shoulders.

Exactly what he expected. Only a heartbeat earlier, Arishima Shougo had read precisely what was coming his way. After witnessing the same artistry countless times in the past, there was no way he wouldn't piece things together.

The ball was released from as low an angle as he could. It rose toward the batter's throat...

"Gh...ha...!"

...before rapidly descending right before his eyes.

Shougo's bat swung through the air as the ball jolted past it like a bolt of lightning.

There was a proper name for a breaking ball with this trajectory; it was known as a sinker. One of the trump cards of a sidearm pitcher, a ball that disappeared from the batter's line of sight. When employed in conjunction with a submarine, it charted

a unique trajectory of a ball that floats before sinking. Hurled at a speed of 150 kilometres per hour, no man's dynamic vision could ever hope to seize it.

"Hah..."

Maintaining the same posture even after he swung his bat, Shougo resigned himself to his fate.

Without a single cut, and without a single waste pitch, he had struck out. Now, all that awaited him was the end he'd heard of. Something seemed off, though. The hooded man simply stood still, without retrieving a fourth ball from his pocket. If he truly meant to kill Shougo with his final pitch, the ball he'd just thrown should've gone dead and smashed into him instead of flying past. A sense of relief washed over him as he started to doubt the credibility of the rumours. But, in the next moment—

"Huh?"

—the sound of fireworks crackling began to echo behind him.

The speckled ball made a sharp turn away from the darkness.

Splat.

In his final moments, he heard the sound of his own skull shattering.

2 / Intermission

▪

The rising temperatures this summer showed no signs of letting up even as the calendar struck August.

"Summer's usually supposed to peak in late July or early August. Looks like this year's gonna be a long one," Kirisu Yaichirou murmured to no one in particular as he blankly stared at the sky.

It was just past noon on August 8th, a Monday with clear skies.

Beneath the blistering sun, a gang of ruffians had spilt across the parking lot of a relatively popular diner. Numbering eight in total, despite the fact that they may have been mistaken as a single group by onlookers, they were actually composed of two opposing factions.

Divided into a five and three split, these youngsters weren't just a bunch of broke hooligans who had come to take advantage of the drink bar.

Kirisu stood behind the group with the numbers advantage, still languidly watching the clouds above.

"Nah, you can just sit back and watch. The last thing we'd want is to cause ya any trouble. We just need ya to make sure things don't go south. Y'know, like a ref. Seriously, I doubt it'll get that serious, though. 'Sides, they're the ones in the wrong here, not us. If someone like you breaks it down to 'em, I'm sure they'll get the picture."

It'd been a few minutes since their negotiations commenced.

After yanking each other's chains by throwing around countless insults, the group of three had elected to resort to more forceful means. In response, the group of five similarly abandoned the route of a peaceful settlement, instead pleading to their mentor behind them for help.

"Damn it! Do you bastards have no honour?!"

Kirisu couldn't help but agree. As an outsider, it was painfully obvious to him the five were the ones in the wrong.

The three boys had handed over the money that they shed blood, sweat, and tears to earn through manual labour because they'd been sweet-talked by the group hiding behind Kirisu. They were given the most unrealistic promise in the world, a promise that they could earn even more money. And just like that, half a summer vacation's worth of wages vanished into thin air. Never mind whether the money would've been put to any good use, this gathering was arranged for them to brazenly apologise for things not going to plan. Of course, the five boys had no intention of paying them back, which practically guaranteed that things would break out into a fight.

They were the ones in the wrong, yet the other party was gullible enough to believe them. To Kirisu, they were both equally guilty.

Today was just another one of Kirisu's one-sided negotiations. Put simply, all that awaited them was a thorough beating. Dealing with troublemakers such as these was what Kirisu found himself most occupied with recently.

While the three boys possessed tall and formidable builds themselves, they were still no match for Kirisu. His body easily exceeded 180 centimetres, with his long limbs extending like whips. To top it all off, his fists were as solid as rocks, boasting nearly a hundred kilos of weight behind them. Only someone hardened by daily training and regular street brawls could possibly withstand his blows.

It took a couple of punches to the face and stomach, lasting roughly two minutes, for them to lose their will to fight completely. After this less-than-restrained display of his strength, he turned his gaze to the sky once more, as though he were spitting at it.

"Thanks, man. These dudes seriously don't know when to quit. For real, you were pretty much our last hope. Oh, wanna grab something to eat? On us, by the way."

"No way I'd ever eat your shitty grub. Hey, you. You got a licence? Your phone will do if you don't. Dude, I haven't got all day. Hurry up before I hit your ass again."

Accepting the cell phone from the boy clutching his stomach in pain, Kirisu turned away.

"Catch y'all later. Oh, and you guys on the floor. Better stay away from real food today. There's no chance it stays down."

"So freakin' brutal! Man, am I glad that isn't me on the floor! By the way, what are you gonna use that phone for? Some shady shit? Damn, you really are hardcore!"

"No shit. Wouldn't want to get snuck up on later, would we? It'll be a pain, but I'll make sure things get taken care of properly."

Without waving goodbye to the group of boys staring at him in puzzlement, Kirisu Yaichirou made his way out of the parking lot.

Though this job was nothing but a bother to him, it did serve as a much-needed warm-up.

After all, an ever more bothersome negotiation was next on his to-do list. One that'd make this squabble between rowdy brats feel like a walk in the park in comparison.

Yasakadai was the town with the largest population within Shikura City.

With both a high school and a university within walking distance of the station, the area was ever-flooded with students. And to top it all off, the construction of a new road leading to the city centre only enticed more and more residents to relocate to Yasakadai.

Naturally, the main avenue was brimming with activity, with the downtown area growing more and more tumultuous. The contrast between the small five-storey buildings that had housed neighbourhood stores for decades, and the newly erected twenty-storey high-rise buildings made the skyline look like a stack of Tetris blocks. Towering over every other building in the vicinity as though it were mocking their petty quarrels was a luxury hotel. It was situated right in front of the station and was over forty stories tall.

Yasakadai had it all: vigour, youth, and an unmistakable chaos. It was that restless pulse of a sleepless city that drew Kirisu Yaichirou to move here after graduating high school the year prior.

His parents were no longer in Shikura. They'd originally relocated here for his parents' promotion, but once he graduated, they took the opportunity to move back to the family home on his father's side. Kirisu meanwhile chose to remain in Shikura, with his loving parents placing their complete trust in their son and leaving him free to carve out whatever life he desired.

After graduating high school, he neither enrolled in college nor joined the workforce. To many, his carefree lifestyle appeared to be a waste of time and young talent. On the other hand, there were many adults on the opposite side of society who celebrated his independence.

His greatest asset had always been his body. With such mature features that one could hardly believe his age, he had the height and hard definition to back it up. He harboured an aversion toward dyeing his hair or using flashy accessories, but a simple glare of his sharp eyes carried enough tension to send shivers running down spines. Still, it wasn't merely his guts or his fists that earned him the reputation. Underclassmen who couldn't quite find their footing looked up to him as some sort of benchmark. He'd spun countless legends as a societal outcast in his high school days. It was almost as if he was destined for this role.

And just as prophesied, he began getting involved in such quarrels from the fall of last year, becoming the face of Yasakadai's delinquents in less than half a year. Now, he was the guy youngsters with nowhere else to turn came to for help and advice. Sometimes, he even helped shelter people, ranging from wanted juveniles, to girls who ran away from home. Had he been born a generation earlier, he may have ended up heading a biker gang.

A social dropout, to put it simply.

That was Kirisu Yaichirou's state of affairs as of August 2004, half a year after he graduated high school.

Their designated meeting place was a café with an oddly pretentious name, Pleiades.

It was relatively empty, since it was now afternoon.

The windows were obstructed by blinds, with the interior's dark lighting making it the perfect venue for the seedy negotiation that was about to take place. Kirisu stubbornly refused to yield the private room to their negotiations, no matter what. Although he didn't want to gather too much attention, that didn't mean going completely unnoticed was beneficial either. A certain level of visibility was part of the handiwork for what was about to unfold.

At a table at the corner of the bar sat a grumpy man dressed in a black suit. There were several menus laid out on the table, but he showed no signs of picking any of them up. Kirisu would be footing the bill today. Perhaps acting as if this café's menu wasn't up to his standards was his way of getting back at Kirisu and portraying himself as some sort of big shot.

He looked to be just about thirty years old, boasting a respectably large build that unfortunately didn't compare to Kirisu's. His cleanly-shaven head and small, almost avian eyes made it clear he was no ordinary citizen. Kirisu couldn't help but feel the generation gap upon witnessing his get-up, but he also understood its necessity. For men like them, projecting dominance without lifting a finger was essential.

"Hey. Sorry to keep you waiting, sir."

"Nah. Have a seat, Yaichi."

Nishino Harusumi was a member of the Shouda Clan, a large-scale crime syndicate rooted in C Prefecture, as well as Kirisu's self-proclaimed mentor.

He was a subordinate of the 7th generation head of the Nanase Family and oversaw the brothels they operated within Yasakadai.

As their name may suggest, violence and crime were how groups like theirs made a living. Most people had a tendency to call them 'yakuza', but the term 'criminal syndicate' was officially recognised by the law. The state acknowledged their institutionalised violence, accepting them as a necessary evil to society. For example, Nishino Harusumi practiced a perfectly rational method of violence. He only resorted to hurting others when he felt discipline or deterrence was required, and he kept those under him in check despite the nature of his profession. A small dose of poison could also serve as a cure. However, a clueless bystander ran the risk of harming themselves,

and so it was the job of someone like him to take the reins. At least, that was the creed he lived by.

Violence would never cease to be. If that was the case, then all one could do was manage and manipulate it to their advantage. At their core, his principles weren't far from Kirisu's. The only difference was that they were doing things at the scale of an entire prefecture, or even an entire nation.

"Looks like you've been keepin' yourself busy. Good. That means you're still alive. By the way, you do know why I'm here, right?"

While he spoke in a tone of intimacy, Nishino's eyes didn't reflect any of the joy in his voice. Though he considered Kirisu one of his subordinates, it was clear he had never quite warmed up to him. To Nishino, a punk who hadn't even hit his twenties talking to him as an equal was nothing short of insolence. It'd taken him close to twenty years crawling up the ladder before he made it to his current position. Because of that, Kirisu's talents were destined to be the subject of his envy.

"Yes, sir. Here, this month's share."

He'd already paid his protection money last week. But bringing that up was out of the question. As one of Nishino's underlings, it was Kirisu's duty to protect his honour at all times. As he could never afford to embarrass his superior, it was his responsibility to take the blame no matter what happened. That was simply how things worked on their side of the world.

"Y'know, things've gotten easier since you started leading all the youngsters. You really are somethin' special. Without you, I'd be bustin' their asses and sendin' 'em out on collection right 'bout now. Seriously, I can't even imagine goin' back to that life anymore."

"Thank you, sir. Is there anything else you need?"

"The boss told me to keep an eye on you. Been a whole year since you started workin' with the Family, eh? Get a load of this. He told me I oughta wine and dine you with some goddamn good stuff!"

Nishino let out a boisterous laugh, but once again, his eyes were not reflecting any of that joy.

The year before, Kirisu had found himself within the Nanase Family's crosshairs. After stepping in to help countless students, both older and younger alike, gradually becoming someone they relied on, he found himself at the head of a small group. Taking in young boys who'd lost their way was originally the job of the yakuza.

Finding themselves impeded by Kirisu's activities, the Nanase Family decided to abduct him. However, before they could even begin the intimidation routine, he somehow landed under the patriarch's personal protection. In the midst of it all, the boss had taken a strong liking to him, allowing him to wiggle away with his life intact. He was even offered several positions within the Family; an offer to work with them, a position within the patriarch's estate, and even his daughter's hand in marriage. For some reason, he was even asked for his autograph. Of course, he declined all of them, unable to keep up with the chain of events.

But meanwhile, a storm brewed inside the Family. The thorn they had intended on disposing of had somehow ended up in the patriarch's good books. Now that they couldn't lay a hand on him, he'd be a major threat to existing power structures if he ever did choose to join them. Thus, they reached the compromise of treating him as Nishino's 'younger brother' for now.

Then again, this wasn't the first time the two of them had crossed paths.

"I appreciate it very much, but there's no need for that. Please tell the President I gave him my thanks."

"Sure. He gets all giddy whenever someone brings you up. Makes life easier for us. Ah, by the way. The director's son's getting married soon. Much as I wanna get him a gift, next week is cuttin' it a bit close for me. Do me a favour and get me a stack, will ya?"

"Within the week?"

"Within tomorrow. In cash, by the way."

In their terms, one stack was equal to one million yen. Twice the protection fee he'd already handed over last week, and out of the question for someone who already bled out half a million yen every month.

"I'm sorry, sir. I just went on collection last week. One million is a bit too—"

"Are you fuckin' stupid? You think I give a shit about that?"

Nishino glared at him, as though demonstrating that he would never take no for an answer.

This was what it meant to be a 'younger brother' in the yakuza. Kirisu only ever served as a plus for Nishino, yet his 'elder brother' only ever served as a minus for him. The rules dictated that it was Nishino's duty to protect him if he ever got wrapped up in trouble, but everyone knew he would be the first to cut Kirisu off. To Nishino Harusumi, Kirisu Yaichirou was nothing but an eyesore that served as a convenient cash cow.

But even then, this guy's a much more decent human being than the person who took Nishino under his wing.

"Right, one more thing. What happened to those kids I asked you to take care of last month?"

"No need to worry about that anymore. They haven't been able to get any product in after their boss killed himself. Give it a month, and they'll be gone with the wind."

"Good. Suicide, aye? The captain mentioned that it seemed just a tad too convenient. Sure you didn't take care of it yourself?"

"Cut it out, please. We had nothing to do with it, seriously. Besides, wouldn't you know more about what happened? You've got a connection with the police, right?"

"Hah, just fuckin' with you. Figured I oughta give you a good scare every once in a while."

Although he denied it, it was clear Nishino meant what he said. A subordinate who lacked the ability to think for themselves would cause trouble for him, but the same could be said for one who was too fast on his feet.

Until a month ago, a group of teens were selling cheap stimulants all over Shikura. Despite no longer dealing in drugs, such actions were a clear infringement on the Nanase Family's territory. Had their influence continued to spread, the Family would've been forced to retaliate. Before that could happen, however, Kirisu took matters into his own hands and squashed the group himself. Needless to say, this only strengthened his esteem with the Nanase Family, or rather, their patriarch.

"I wouldn't do anything that reckless. If ever something happened, I'd come to you for help."

"As you should. I'll give you a lil' tip as a reward. Yaichi, that new game of yours is close to catching fire."

For something to catch fire meant that the police were getting close to intervening.

"....."

His avian eyes observed Kirisu's expression with the precision of a hawk. However, he wasn't doing so out of a desire to shame his subordinate for his oversights. While he desired for Kirisu to humiliate himself by breaking the yakuza code, allowing the police to get involved was something to be avoided at all costs. Because if they did, there was a possibility that they would unearth a buried landmine.

"Whatever. Doesn't seem like you're just playin' dumb, either. Take a good look at your feet, Yaichi. This stuff's gettin' out of hand."

"Yes, sir. Thank you for the valuable lesson."

"If it becomes too much to handle, run as far away as you can. I wouldn't mind helpin' you out with that."

"Hahaha, come on. If you 'helped' me out, I'd never end up coming back, brother."

"Man, shut the fuck up. The boss would murder my ass if I did that. Just keep a good eye out. Snuff out any potential threats before they can bite you in the ass."

With a short display of consideration at the very end, Nishino stood up. He usually had two or three subordinates in tow with him, but he always came alone when speaking with Kirisu. While Kirisu could hardly imagine a worse human being than him, it seemed that Nishino at least felt some degree of responsibility toward those he took under his wing.

"My brother, well, I guess I should be callin' him captain now. The captain always says that it's a kid's right to enjoy their youth and do whatever the hell they want. A word of advice from me, though. Stay as far away from blood as you can while you're still young. That flashy game of yours ain't been doin' too bad recently. Gotta

admit, that was one hell of an idea. But just remember, never play your hand without an out."

"Thanks. Does that mean I have permission to continue? I'd rather not have to start with drugs and break-ins."

"Guess so. Things are goin' well. Ya don't gotta force yourself to do things the way the captain wants 'em. Just don't forget the code. If some dumbasses mess with your turf, make damn sure they know who they're messin' with. No need to go easy on 'em just 'cause they're a buncha kids. The point is, never go back on your own word."

Don't forget the code. Those words had practically become a catchphrase for Nishino.

It was considered taboo for a criminal organisation to lay their hands on a civilian. Their pride dictated that they only bore their fangs against those who provoked them. But that same code also meant every stain on their honour would be paid back in blood.

"Uh, just so you know, I have no plans of becoming a yakuza."

"This ain't about the family. That's just how a man oughta be."

Doesn't exactly speak to my soul when it's coming from a bald guy in shades, Kirisu Yaichirou thought to himself.

"Right, by the way. Do we have any free hands in debt collection right now?"

"Where the hell did that come from? Should be a couple."

"I know a buncha idiots who got caught in some stupid scam. Mind introducing me to someone who can beat the shit out of those dumbass scammers and get their money back?"

"Well, I don't see why not. What's in it for you, though?"

"Nothing, actually. Figured I'd try putting your advice into practice. Y'know, the code and all that. Kinda hard to go to bed knowing there're a buncha victims getting shafted out there, you feel me?"

◆

After parting with Nishino, Kirisu made his way downtown.

He'd been burdened with yet another unreasonable demand, but he was at least glad that the dreaded meeting was finally over. All that remained was to kill some time and wait for his dampened spirits to perk up again.

Then again, he wasn't in the mood to hit up some random girl on his contact list and hang out, instead making for a small hideaway that he often frequented.

Man, that guy really ain't shit. Catching fire? Cut the crap. If all that dumbass wants is to impress people, then he can start by growing out a flattop.

Kirisu already knew that a police incident had taken place in his territory. When Nishino glared at him earlier, all Kirisu did was breathe a mental sigh and play dumb. His intel had come much too late.

If he wanted me in his debt, he coulda just given me real advice instead of some pointless warning.

"Um, excuse me. May I read your fortune?"

"....."

He could only curse his luck. After that shitshow, he'd even ended up as a target for some shady street con. With a dismissive wave, Kirisu took a turn into one of the back alleys.

He arrived at an area that used to serve as a shopping district. Once the Japan Railway made its way to Shikura and a department store was built by the station, the place had slowly withered into the ghost town it was now. Hanging at the top of an arch was a sign reading *Fureai Avenue*, but the years of rainfall had rendered it barely even legible. Almost all of the various tiny stores packed tightly next to one another had their shutters down.

It was like looking at a scene straight out of a Western. After two minutes of walking through the dust-laden streets, he arrived in front of a small movie theater. While its age was undeniable, that same antiquity was also what gave it its charm. Its exterior was modelled in a western style, with a dainty spiral staircase lurking past its narrow entrance that could barely fit three.

Perhaps referring to it as a cinema instead of a movie theater would be more apt. It was a relic of a bygone time when films stood at the peak of all entertainment.

A small, shining remnant of an age when cinema possessed the power to grant all those who entered a fleeting, dreamlike respite from reality.

"Sup, gramps. Mind if I come in?"

The old man working the counter simply laid asleep. Kirisu slid a thousand-yen bill across the counter as he walked through the antiquated entrance. After making a full rotation up the spiral staircase, he arrived at the second floor, opening the door to the cinema. It was usually empty, but every now and then some peculiar fellows like Kirisu would fill the silence. Today proved to be like most others, with Kirisu being the only guest.

"Ugh, another French romance movie? The old man really eats this stuff up, huh?"

He set his large frame down on the sofa. Dust puffed up. The place clearly hadn't seen a real cleaning in a long time.

A theater with less than fifty seats and a projector clacking mechanically.

The lousy audio from the broken speakers and the screen that'd grown brown with age. Everything was as he remembered from his childhood days.

"Haaaah..."

After breathing a small sigh, he sank deep into the sofa, as though steeping himself in the remnants of his past.

He found himself enjoying every passing day.

Kirisu Yaichirou loved his current life from the bottom of his heart.

He'd always been a vagabond at heart who preferred living like a yakuza. An ample amount of pleasure and an ample amount of thrill were all he truly desired. Friends who would laugh at dumb jokes alongside him were enough for him to be content. In the end, he was an outcast who would've gladly accepted dying by the roadside ten years from now if that was the fate that awaited him.

The thought of sacrificing something for his future never occurred to him. It wasn't that he disagreed with it, but more so that the thought simply never occurred to him. The only responsibility he had in life was that of eventually creating his own

offspring. Once he fulfilled his duty of reproduction, he had no further intention of allowing himself to be bound by others.

"What the hell, man. When did things get so boring? God, this movie never gets any better no matter how many times I watch it!"

As the film lacked subtitles, only bits and pieces of it registered within his head. It was a classic romance, where a pair of virtuous lovers had to triumph over the temptation of evil.

"I have no idea how anyone can actually watch this shit over and over again without getting bored."

He had no lingering attachments to the movie, as he'd only come here to engross himself in the cinema itself. When he was still a child, he would sometimes come here with two of his close friends. The old man at the counter had already grown senile by then, allowing them to sneak past him as often as they wanted.

"Dumbass. You'd better not be stupid enough to fall for that."

He couldn't help but feel the need to berate the protagonist.

The villain said: 'I shall grant your deepest desire in exchange for that which you hold most dear.'

"That's fraud, bitch," Kirisu said as he clicked his tongue.

No matter how lofty the desire, nothing would change if you gave up your most prized possession for it.

In that sun-kissed park, a man had once tried to tempt them with those words. But despite his young age, he had already realised the truth. That was why he shook his head in rejection. Such thinly veiled lies were of no value to him.

However, Kirisu was only able to do so because he was already content with what he had. For someone who hadn't possessed anything of value in the first place, such a contract was irresistible.

"....."

Drowsiness began to assail Kirisu as the movie continued to roll.

Within the dark cinema, unfamiliar foreign words continued to spill from the speakers.

Together with a gratingly loud sound came a car accident reflected on the screen. A crushed hood. Screws bursting out. Tyres rolling through the streets. The heroine racing toward her lover. The debt collector's head flying right off, drawing a clean line of blood on the ground.

With the sound of a *splat,*

he recalled the sensation of a pulverised skull on his hands.

"....."

Whatever drowsiness remained had made its way out of his system. Fighting the vertigo off, Kirisu attempted to calm himself down by telling himself it was already over.

The film ended with a scene of the two lovers embracing. After the credits rolled and artificial applause crackled through the speakers, the curtain began to fall on the screen.

"Get with the times, geezer. Nobody drops the curtain after a movie anymore."

Perhaps that, too, was a part of what made this cinema a classic.

Back in the day, Kirisu and his friends had tried to look past the curtain. All they wanted was to see a continuation of the movie. They were convinced that the next part of the story awaited them past the curtain. Or at least, that was what his friends believed at first.

Kirisu, however, was different. He knew the curtain was a mere prop, and he didn't harbour any lingering sentiments toward the movie either. In other words, he was the type of person who could understand when things had run their course. So, even when he closed off his future due to his unruly behaviour in high school, or even when he decided to quit baseball because he could no longer deceive his own feelings, neither of those hurt him too much.

While he had his own share of regrets, he would never wish for a do-over.

This movie was the same.

Its run was over. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Besides, once the curtain drops, everyone's supposed to get outta their seat, right? That's just the bare minimum of good conduct, ain't it?"

Abiding by his own succinct conclusion, Kirisu quickly left the cinema.

◆

After his quick respite within the cinema, Kirisu found himself with heightened spirits as he returned downtown.

"Please, sir. Allow me to read—"

The same shady tout was still standing out in the sun. Despite the heat, she still kept on smiling through it all, calling out to passersby without missing a beat. Kirisu gazed at her in amazement, wondering if she had nothing better to do.

"Wait, what the fuck? Was that…"

He stood in shock, as though he had just seen a ghost in the daytime. At the edge of his vision stood a young man who gave off a shady impression. As he took a closer look, the man's shadiness was only brought further to the forefront. A unique silhouette with one striking feature.

August 9th, 2004.

The man casually strolling through the streets with one arm was Ishizue Arika, who had just recently been discharged from Origa Memorial Hospital.

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"Arika, you should really, like, get away from here for now. There're still a bunch of people pissed at the other Arika. You know how lively you kids can get. Who knows when they'll show up and try to rob you?"

Some very sound advice.

After my joyful stretch at Origa Memorial Hospital came to a close, the first things that welcomed me back were the blazing summer heat and some helpful advice from my new neighbour, Niijima.

"Wait. You're actually serious about this?"

"Tote-uh-lly. It happened pretty darn often with the last Arika. I mean, your room's on the fourth floor, and mine's on the third. Even if something did happen, I won't be able to come up and help. I'm way too lazy for all that."

Niijima, a thirty-year-old man clothed in a Hawaiian shirt and thick make-up, was a genuinely nice fellow. His greatest charm was the fact that he sometimes let his true feelings slip through the cracks. In a place where most residents avoided each other entirely, even simple words of advice went a long way for me.

Shikura City was filled with welfare facilities built for the sake of Possessed, or rather, patients of Agonist Disorder. My new home, the 13th Welfare Housing Complex, was just another one of those. It originally served as housing for the disabled and poor, but this year marked the start of its acceptance of patients from Origa Memorial Hospital.

Six stories tall, it was built almost entirely of reinforced concrete. Without a single veranda, every single hallway only led to the inside of the building. You could even call it a giant, massive prison cell. One that was constructed in a way that inhibited any outsiders from peeking in as well as anyone on the inside from peeking out.

As Niijima stated, Ishizue Arika's room was situated on the fourth floor. It was too high to escape by jumping out of the window if someone ever broke in. But then again, that was never a consideration. The windows were lined with bars to prevent anyone from attempting suicide in the first place.

"Hey, are you even listening? Do you have anywhere else to go? If you don't, you can come live with me for a bit."

Of course, I didn't intend on doubting his intentions. Most of the people here were actually quite gentlemanly. For example, the fact that he treated a straight man like me purely as a friend was proof of that gentlemanliness. Er, well, perhaps I should be saying maidenliness instead.

"Mmm. Guess I'll be splitting time between my family home and here. Can't slack on the cleaning too. Should still have it until around September, so there should be no problem with me crashing."

As inconvenient as it may be, it sure beat getting jumped in my sleep. My close ties with Agonist Disorder already ostracised me from most of society. If I stirred up any more needless ruckus, there was a real chance that word would make its way to my presiding officer, Ms. Mato.

"If you say so. Oh, right. Did you find a job yet? The first Arika was a real bright kid, but you've got a few issues on that front, don't you?"

As much as I appreciated his concern, I'd already landed a job yesterday. The pay was insane, and with such incredible working conditions too. Well, it wasn't the sorta workplace you saw all too often, in a bunch of different ways.

◆

While the vicinity of the JR Station rapidly grew more and more modernised with each passing year, as soon as you ventured two or three kilometres away, the landscape gave way to sprawling fields of green and sweeping mountain ranges. Everyone was getting their panties in a twist over talks of an airport or some highway to the city centre being built, but once you looked past all that, this place was just some

shoddy countryside in C Prefecture. The only way to get enough land to build an airport was to have a shit ton of it without any people living in it anyway.

Every so often, you'd catch sight of a small forest hidden within the sea of endless fields. Tucked away in one of those groves was my new workplace.

Within the unpopulated forest sat an emergency reservoir that no one had any clue about.

Crazy, I know, but beneath it lay an underground chamber packed with all sorts of different antiques. Honestly, a secret hideout like this would be right at home in any auction out there. It ain't the sort of place your average Joe would end up at. A microcosm isolated from the outside world, refusing its influence entirely. That was the true nature of this plot of land in the outskirts of Shikura, the Karyou family's private property.

Then again, couriers from the outside world still found their way into this microcosm about ten times a day. Whether that was a coincidence or simply the best they could do, however, was something I had no way of knowing. A bus stop was located nearby, with the city bus stopping by the forest before heading back to town, not unlike that lone railroad threading through the galaxy.

Blurred letters spelling out the word *Torinonori* were inscribed on the rusted timetable.

After getting off the bus, I trudged through the forest for a few minutes. Suddenly, a vast expanse opened up before my eyes. With a single lamppost, it looked as though the surrounding earth had been hollowed out with a spoon. At its centre, a giant cube built out of concrete.

Today was my second time here, but that didn't make it any less surreal.

No matter how many times I ended up here, I doubted I would ever get used to this scenery. The summer sun towered above me. Growing dizzy from the scent of steaming grass, I rested my hand on the door.

Inside awaited a deep darkness, with a stairwell descending deep underground. I may have called it a microcosm, but this area was more akin to a dark nebula. Just gazing into this umbra made it seem like some alien creature was about to sneak up and pounce on me.

Paying no heed to the chill running down my spine, I set my feet through the door and slammed it shut behind me, far too shaken to glance back.

All exterior light was blocked off, leaving only my footsteps echoing through the darkness. Fumbling my way through, I eventually ended up at a door at the end of the concrete passage.

"Heya. Welcome in, Ishizue."

All I could do was squint, blinded by its unsullied purity.

It was as if a sea had been built in mid-air.

In other words, the bottom of the reservoir was the ceiling of this room. Sifted rays of summer sun fell through the glazed ceiling. The harsh, thirty-eight-degree heat had been mellowed out by the ten metres of ocean that obstructed it, giving rise to a beautiful illumination.

In the centre of the room was a bed equipped with a canopy, a humanoid figure resting upon it.

He looked to be around fourteen years old.

Long, silky dark hair spilt across the sheets, framing finely shaped features that charmed all who glanced at him. His nearly translucent eyes glistened silver, a trait usually only seen in those with foreign blood.

For all that his appearance seemed to embody the human ideal, he also happened to have been born with a terribly defective body.

That was the resident of this room and my current employer.

His name was Karyou Kaie. A boy whose limbs were all prosthetic, and someone who promised to help find a left arm that suited me.

◆

A devil lurks within the forest on the outskirts of town.

It wasn't until later that those rumours made their way to me. Specifically, I only found out about them once I started heading out to deal with some Possessed

myself. Seriously, those bastards were way too lively for a bunch of blokes who were supposed to be sick. And so, at this point in time, I only ever perceived Karyou Kaie as some mysterious kid with some weird tastes who just so happened to be my employer. Cooped up in his own sealed-off space, he handed me easy money and supplied me with a bunch of strange prosthetics. The only child of a prestigious family who had lost his limbs in an accident and was moved away from civilisation in order to recuperate. That was about the best I could come up with back then.

My job entailed taking care of a limbless child.

I mean, how much easier could it get?

Even someone with only one arm could handle such a task.

The caretaker's prior experience didn't matter, and neither did their background.

I was on the verge of crying tears of joy. Only someone with a true heart of gold would hire a guy fresh out of Origa. That, or he was just plain suicidal.

To top it all off, he was a collector of various prosthetics.

I considered myself truly and genuinely blessed. Karyou Kaie needed various prosthetics himself, so there was nothing strange about him being a collector. I never stopped to question how strange his home was, or how he'd managed to live there before I came around. Why would I, when the sweetest deal of my life was dangling right in front of me?

And that was how I, Ishizue Arika, got involved with something I never ever should've.

The devil of the basement. My friend, and the possible originator of all evils that would eventually be felled by a knife to his defenceless heart.

◆

Long story short, Karyou ended up being the best employer I could ever hope for.

With a friendly smile always plastered on his face, I found myself thinking that I would've seriously fallen for him if he were a woman at least once an hour.

Sometimes, he slipped into this mature, provocative tone, but that was just another one of his charms. After helping him out with lunch, I took out my trusty partner—my notepad. I wrote down the following words: Karyou Kaie. Hope we stick together for a long time. Those were my honest, unadulterated feelings toward him. This was the meeting of a lifetime. Actually, you could even call it the meeting of several lifetimes.

"Hm? I see that notepad pretty often. Are you into journaling or something?"

"Nah, it's more out of necessity. 'Cause I forget everything that happened in the day once night comes. And when I say everything, I mean it. Gone, all of it. And for that reason, I keep all the important information I need to retain in this notepad."

He turned to me in puzzlement.

"That's... quite the surprise. Is it some form of anterograde amnesia, perhaps? You know, like only being able to store memories for a certain amount of time."

"The thing is, I don't actually forget anything during the day. It's not like what people usually imagine. You know those cases where they even end up forgetting their names? Mine's nothing like that. I have all my memories from until the moment my amnesia sets in, but anything from after that is a no go. I lose my memories from the day when the sun sets, and that's about it. Think of it like hitting the reset button on a clock. Because of that, I need to list down everything I need to know as well as anything I need to do on the next day. Most of the time, it does the job. Anything I check at night stays in my head, so there's no need to worry about it."

"Every single day? To my knowledge, cases like this typically sort themselves out within a day, no?"

Most patients of anterograde amnesia are said to make a recovery within twenty-four hours. The majority of cases are caused by reduced blood flow to the temporal lobe near the ear, which houses the primary auditory cortex. Since that region plays a key role in the encoding of memories, recovery tends to happen naturally as long as there's no actual, permanent brain damage. But cases like mine, where memories from a specific time frame disappear at the same time every single day, can't really be lumped in with standard anterograde amnesia anymore.

"It's not as bad as it sounds, if I'm being honest. You can work around it pretty easily once you get the hang of it. I'll prove that to you tomorrow, so you just sit back and wait. I do get why you're surprised, though. Not exactly something you see every day."

"Interesting. You've given me something to look forward to tomorrow. Oh, and to clarify. The reason I was so surprised isn't really because of your symptoms. I was more taken aback by your behaviour. So, this is what you're saying. Forgetting everything that happened to you during the day isn't something you particularly mind, huh?"

A crooked smile tugged at his lips.

"Hm?"

This time, it was my turn to give him a questioning look.

Um, what was that? Are you really sure that was the right reaction?

"Here you go. You can use this one for now."

He used his pitch-black right arm to hand me a left arm of the same shade. This arm was modelled after the upper arm, running from the shoulder down to the elbow.

Generally speaking, taking off a limb at the joint is called disarticulation, while cutting through the bone is an amputation. The key difference comes down to whether the bone is severed at the joint or wholly removed from the body.

In my case, it was an amputation from the upper arm down. And so, naturally, the prosthetic I was given was meant for an amputee.

My first impression was that of a female marble statue.

Not a single seam was visible, yet its surface was smooth as plaster. While its beauty was undeniable, I didn't have high hopes for its practicality. It seemed like a decorative prosthetic, one created only to mimic a limb in form.

"Come on, now. Go ahead and try it on."

He smiled at me in anticipation.

Even after finding out he was a dude, his looks were still dangerous enough to mess with my head if I didn't keep myself in check. People often use the phrase 'a smile as bright as the sun,' but today I learned there was actually something out there that outshone it.

"Uhh..."

I hesitantly took the arm from him.

The entire thing was painted black, even the area that'd be attached to me. It didn't even have an attachment to adhere it to my body. There were two belts on the upper arm. Apparently, you were supposed to fasten them to the shoulder like you would a cast.

"Um, let me get this straight. You want me to pretend to put this on, right?"

He just smiled in response, the same expression on his face. It seemed he wanted me to try it on before saying anything.

In the first place, I hadn't brought any sort of mounting gear to properly attach a prosthetic onto my body. That meant having to put this arm on as if I were assembling an action figure was actually more convenient to me.

I'd lost my left arm a year and a half ago. It was a pretty bizarre case. I'd woken up in the middle of the night to some strange noise, only to realise my little sister had already devoured my entire arm. As it turned out, the less-than-ordinary circumstances extended all the way to my arm too. Everything past a certain point of my upper arm disappeared cleanly, as if it had never existed to begin with. My nerves should've been shrieking from torn muscle and shattered bone, not to mention the life-threatening amount of blood loss. Yet, for some reason, the wound was sealed completely shut. It was completely smooth, as though it had been welded onto my body.

A scar so natural it melted into the rest of my skin, and a prosthetic sculpted so delicately it had abandoned all practicality. Well, what else could one call this but fate?

"Gh...ah...."

The moment the foreign limb became one with my body, a freezing shiver shot down my spine.

"Agh... Wh..."

My vision began to pulsate, my entire brain engulfed in light. It felt like giant, dark fingers were caressing the entirety of my body gently.

"Felt so good you can't even get up? Feel free to use the sofa. Excellent. I figured it'd work, but this compatibility is astounding. You're just so... absolutely perfect. You

just keep getting better and better with each passing day," he muttered in a tone rapt with ecstasy. His wicked smile was that of a predator, mere moments before pouncing upon its prey.

They say the devil comes in a pleasing shape. I really should've been more wary of something so beautiful. A normal human being would've probably realised much sooner, but unfortunately for me, my sense of danger had been ripped off alongside my arm. The truth was, that was the largest aftereffect of losing my arm. Ever since that night a year and a half ago, any capability I once had to detect danger disappeared completely. The doctors at Origa told me it was a mental disorder brought about by the loss of my arm, and as such, was currently impossible to treat.

And so, despite the boy in front of me clearly not being human, as long as he wasn't firing lasers from his eyes or some superhuman into smashing houses apart with his bare hands, I didn't particularly feel the need to run away. I did exactly as he said and rested myself on the sofa.

"This thing is insane. I've never sat on anything more comfortable in my whole darn life."

The prosthetic's wiles must've had me in a stupor or something. Mustering those, for lack of a better word, stupid impressions, I gave myself up to the temptation of sleep. The next instant, those good ol' sheep started drifting across my vision. My grip on reality began to sink even deeper into the sofa.

"Seriously?! Hey, cut it out! Aren't you a little too defenceless?! You're free to get all stupid on me, but who else am I supposed to talk to if you're asleep?!"

He tried to scramble out of the bed, his silken hair swishing softly. Unfortunately, he wasn't capable of such a feat on his own. He just flailed around helplessly, like a beautiful exhibit piece trapped behind glass.

"Oh, come on! You've got to be kidding me! Get a grip on yourself already! Are you there?! Wake up! I really hate to say this, but falling asleep on the job is seriously unacceptable! Especially on your first day!"

It seems he meant it when he said he loved humans. Losing his long-awaited chatmate to a midday system failure must've hit him hard. As much as I wanted to do

something about it, I couldn't even lift a finger against the countless Marys rushing in from all over the country.

It was the day after signing a two-hundred-thousand-yen-per-month contract with the devil of the underground room. I found myself sinking into a dreamlike meadow, having stumbled upon a strange prosthetic that fit my left arm perfectly.

◆

I woke up to a completely different scenery.

A deep darkness hung over me. The flowing water looked as though stagnant darkness had pooled at the bottom of a reservoir. A bottomless vortex of dark.

Entrapped within its maelstrom was a faint wash of moonlight spilling down on us. The light of the stars was too distant to reach us. The moonlight served as the sole source of lighting within this old-fashioned room.

"Ugh... gah..."

A single voice broke through the serene silence of the room. I had goosebumps all over. Even though I'd lost my sense of danger, my sixth sense was telling me I needed to get the hell out of here.

Upon looking closer, the silhouette of a giant fish was swimming through the ceiling.

Under the sofa was a blind, black dog, gnawing on the hem of my jeans.

And to top it all off, my boss was giving me a thousand-yard stare all the way from the bed.

"Erm... uh... good morning!"

I tried to wave my hand and give him a casual greeting, but I failed miserably.

How could I, in the face of that?

His eyes gleamed like diamonds in the dark. Like moonlight glinting off the water, I could practically read the words 'You're fired' flashing off his eyes.

What was I even doing here?

I desperately racked my brain, trying to figure out what I'd done to make myself the subject of his ire.

"Um, I wasn't sleeping. Absolutely not."

"Unbelievable. Did your parents never teach you any manners?"

Bingo! I'd been snoozing on the job! And on my first day, no less!

"My sincerest apologies. By the way, can you tell me how we ended up here? Oh, right. Have I told you about my condition yet?"

"Yes, you have. You forget about what happens in the day, right? Oh, by the way. You passed out around one in the afternoon. It's currently nine in the evening, and I spent the entire day like this," he said, with a devilish smile creeping across his face.

At last, the shivers that had been running throughout my body finally disappeared.

"I'm truly, genuinely sorry. I'll do everything I can to make sure this never happens again."

"That's enough with the apologies. Besides, this'll probably happen pretty frequently from now on. If your emotions are incited every single time, then I should be the one apologising instead. Out of consideration for him, I'll let that part of you slide."

"Him?"

I glanced down at the black dog lurking by my feet. So that's who he meant. By the way, I'd really appreciate it if he stopped chewing on my jeans.

"You mean I'm not getting fired?"

"Nope. But I've decided to change my approach to you. This half-day has told me all I need to know about you. Right. There's no point pretending to be something I'm not with a person like you. What's there to gain from spoiling a useless dog? I'll make sure to get every last drop out of you. And don't even try to run away, because I've already put a collar around your neck."

He looked at me with shimmering eyes, his mouth warped into the smile of a twisted breeder deciding how best to train his dog.

"....."

I snuck a peek at my notepad. It described him as a kind person, among plenty of other flattering adjectives. Uh, what the hell was I even thinking during the day?

(8/5)

That pretty much summed up the start of my new life outside of Origa.

Most of my time was split between three abodes: the Thirteenth Welfare Housing Complex, which would eventually be repurposed into a residential building, the Ishizue family home, which was set to be sold off in September, and the underground room on the outskirts of town. Much to my consternation, I couldn't exactly get by without heading into town every now and then. Being able to coop yourself up in some underground room was a privilege afforded only to the elite.

Just as Niijima said, public order within the city had gone visibly downhill in the year and a half I'd been away.

Perhaps times were changing. Or perhaps someone had discovered something that felt even better than sleeping. Compared to those days, more and more young punks were parading around the night. Back when I was a student, going out on walks late at night was something to be ashamed of. But these days, it felt like most of it was turned a blind eye to. Maybe most parents no longer felt the need to discipline their children as long as they didn't get in trouble with the law.

"Wait. Is that you, Ishizue-senpai?"

One late night at a convenience store, I came across a familiar face.

"When did you become so freakin' white?! You in a band? That's gotta be it! That's sick, dude! Never pegged you as the band type. Wait, what the fuck?! Your arm! It's gone! How?! Why?! You were supposed to be Shikura Hills's greatest treasure! Who the hell said you were allowed to lose an arm?!"

It was a man with a large build, dressed in just the kind of get-up you'd expect from some jobless guy fresh out of high school. He had some random stuff in his cart, like a pack of vegetable juice.

"Took the words right outta my mouth, Shimashou. I don't remember you being this sorta guy either. By the way, you might wanna keep it down. We aren't on the field anymore."

I gave my underclassman a light scolding out of consideration for the customers around us.

"Right, my bad. Somethin' real crazy must've happened for you to lose your arm like that. I may be outta high school now, but I really am still just some ignorant kid," he apologised earnestly.

Due to being in a sports club, he had a tendency to get worked up when in the presence of his seniors. It'd been over a year and a half since I'd last seen him, and yet…

"Geez, you haven't matured a single bit."

I quickly fit the bill before he had the chance to.

"Hey! Wait for me!"

He hastily scurried to catch up to me.

"That's another troublesome piece of work I'll have to deal with," I said under my breath.

Yet for some reason, as I glanced at my reflection through the convenience store window, I realised I had a gleeful smirk on my face.

I was on my way back to the Ishizue family home, while he had missed the last train. Naturally, I did what any decent person would do.

"Feel free to use any of the rooms on the first floor. By the way, do you know how to cook?"

"Hell yeah. I know how to whip up some curry. Oh, and I make some real mean onigiri too."

"Seriously? Man, you're like some washed-up baseball manager."

I guess old habits really do die hard. For some reason, I didn't even hesitate to invite him into my home.

"I haven't seen you in forever. Did you skip town or something?"

"I was in the hospital for a whole year and a half. Honestly, I have no goddamn clue what's been going on out here. Oh, yeah. How far did Koala make it last year? I remember them making it to the District Finals the year before."

"Anything but that, please. We made it to the finals last year too. But… I can still remember the day we got crushed like it was yesterday."

"Crushed? Seriously? With that team? Didn't you transfer over to Koala because you were convinced we could never beat them?"

"Mhm. Worst call of my life, man. I thought we had it in the bag for sure. Ah, shit. It's all comin' back to me now. How the hell did things end up like that? If only that asshole Kazumi could be less of a self-absorbed prick..."

Koala Hills was another high school in the area and was a rival of Shikura First High. Because both schools were known for their strong baseball clubs, they were called Shikura High of the Offence and Koala of the Defence.

"What batting number did you end up on? You finally make it to fourth after all those years?"

"Nah, I took you up on your advice and stayed on third. I did get offered a shot at it, but it didn't take me too long to realise I wasn't cut out for extra-base hits."

"Dumbass, took you experiencing it yourself to see the light, eh? If we had you, our line-up would've balanced out perfectly.

No matter how good your guy on fourth is, baseball ain't the kinda game you can win alone."

"Hahaha. All the other schools were clearly sick of you guys. Especially back in the Spring Koshien, none of those guys even bothered to put up a proper match. I went to go see one of your scrimmages with Koala. That shit was nasty, man."

"Right? It was such a turn-off that a buncha baseball geezers went to lodge a complaint. Things got a bit better in the summer because of that. Well, only when there wasn't a runner on the field, though."

Our tales of the past showed no signs of stopping, eventually lasting well through midnight. A bunch of laughing was heard from within the cursed Ishizue home that night. I knew someone was probably out there, cowering in fear at the serial killer's older brother. Still, that wouldn't be enough to stop me. I was finally out of that hellish hospital. Can't expect a guy to keep going without a bit of happiness in his life, can we?

"Y'know, I really am thankful to you," he said in a casual tone devoid of any gratitude.

At the end of the night when we lost ourselves in memories three years past. We'd both gotten drunk and were about to head to bed.

"Hm? For what?"

"Honestly, part of the reason I left Shikura High was 'cuz of the coach. All that fucker ever did was tell me to practice more. 'Make your steps shorter!' and 'Work on your form!' and all that crap. I couldn't stand that shit."

"Right. I remember that geezer. What's that got to do with this, though?"

"You helped me out back then, remember? You told me that the most important part of batting wasn't form but motion. That there was no need to change the movement that was most natural to me. I realised how important those words of yours were when I got to Koala."

What an uptight fellow. That advice wasn't worth jack. The fact that he was able to make something out of it was proof of his very own dedication.

"Those are the fruits of your talent. Not that I've seen your batting ever since then."

"Oh, by the way. Have you heard of SvS?"

"Nope. That the name of some batting centre? I wouldn't mind going with you, if you want."

"For real?! How's tomorrow sound, then?! Wait... right. Forget about it. I'm sorry," he said in a voice full of regret.

Took him quite a bit to realise. The senior batter he idolised, Ishizue Arika, would never be able to hold a bat again.

"I don't think you heard, but that coach actually left the team during the spring of my second year."

"That asshat *actually* quit?! But he said he was gonna be at it until the day he died! I thought that bastard was immortal!"

"Nah. Y'see, the old fart lost his marbles after the Spring Koshien. He was desperate to make it to the Summer Koshien, so he started doing some crazy shit. He went all like, 'I will become a demon! Anything unnecessary shall be done away with!' and started beating the shit out of the first years. Basically, your average piece-of-shit coach."

"Damn, the worst part is that I can *actually* imagine him doing that. What happened next?"

"When our manager heard him, she had one hell of a light bulb moment. After that, she went to go grab a bat and smacked his ass with a full swing. He started screaming at her, but she just went all 'You're the most useless one here, coach!' and that was that."

"Holy shit! What an absolute badass!"

He held his stomach in pain as he laughed. Boy, was I glad that he got a kick out of it. After all, everyone who witnessed it happening in real time saw their lives flash right before their eyes.

(8/9)

There was a coffee shop called the Malion right by the 13th Welfare Housing Complex.

Its location meant it didn't get much foot traffic, but it was quite the hidden gem, possessing both a vast menu and respectable flavours. What I liked most was that even on a busy day, there'd only be about ten customers at most. There were even times when I had the place entirely to myself. The best table in the house was the one by the window.

In a place no ordinary citizen in their right mind would set foot into, a woman of indescribable beauty now sat occupying that very table.

Appearing to be in her late twenties, she had Western features and boasted a height of 170 centimetres, tall enough to be a model. Her eyes were dainty and almond-shaped, with such fine, delicate eyebrows they looked pencilled in, all of which served to accent her gentle, feminine air.

She wore just the right amount of accessories too. Enough to catch the eye, yet not enough to overwhelm it. A good glance at her flank was enough to make out the outline of a holster. To top it all off, her long hair fell down her back, tied off neatly at the nape, only heightening her charm.

"So, Shozai. Are you serious about this job of yours?"

This woman, the embodiment of female beauty, was Ms. Mato. She'd ordered a whole sirloin steak set for breakfast and proceeded to demolish it in record time.

Her manners were too perfect to be wasted on a coffee shop of this calibre. Such exquisite yet barbaric knifework. The speed and precision with which she dismantled her meal were enough to snuff my appetite out.

"Do you think it's a bad idea?"

"Of course I do. Involving yourself with that thing is practically asking for death. Whether he's the one to pull the trigger or not, there's no way you're getting out alive. What an absolute buffoon you are. Your survival instincts have gotten even worse than when you were in Origa. Good grief, keep the masturbation in check. Too much, and it'll turn you into an impotent."

"Uhhh..."

This was exactly what I had come for. Remember, I had an obligation to contact her once every four days. One of the conditions of my release was that I'd be assigned a presiding officer to keep tabs on how well I was reintegrating into normal society. And mine, Touma Mato, was as harsh as ever today.

She was the stereotypical image of a successful corporate woman. From my time in Origa, she wore a white lab coat like a doctor, but now she was wearing a branded suit. The unfortunate truth was that this lady was actually a fed. She'd come all the way from police headquarters to C Prefecture, and was now the head honcho of the Agonist Disorder Task Force.

Doctor Roman once gave me the scoop: she'd been with Public Safety until this offer. The rest of this ruthless inspector's past, however, still remained shrouded in mystery. By the way, she was granted the title of inspector upon coming to C Prefecture. There was no doubt she had a bright future ahead of her.

"What's wrong? No appetite, Shozai?"

Oblivious to the heartburn I was feeling, she shifted her gaze toward the still uneaten bone-in sausage on my plate. This carnivore had a proper upbringing, you see. She hated seeing any leftovers on a plate.

"I'll eat it if you won't. Damn, I messed up. That wasn't nearly enough to satisfy me. I should've gone for two hundred grams instead."

Without waiting for my reply, she took my whole freakin' plate of breakfast away from me. Yes, the entire plate. There was no denying she'd been brought up properly, but sometimes her conduct really made me wonder.

"What're you getting so worked up about? You're the one who introduced me to Kaie. As someone who understands the importance of social welfare, it's my duty to extend a helping hand to those who need it."

"I'll ask you just in case. Is that how you really feel?"

"Sorry, I lied. I just want his prosthetic. By the way, do you know what that thing is? I didn't get any of the inverse-phantom pain I usually do, and I could even move it around perfectly."

"Oh? I'd heard you could move it, but the first part's new to me."

Her interest now piqued, she stopped herself from reaching out to the sausage on my plate and commanded me to tell her the rest.

"I've only tried it on twice, so I can't really say anything yet. But both times, I didn't get the usual symptoms. None of the pain in my left arm that I'd get when I'd try on any other prosthetic."

Ishizue Arika lost his left arm a year and a half ago. I didn't particularly mind, since there were no life-threatening aftereffects. I remained perfectly capable of going about things without it. The only issue was how people would walk on eggshells around me once they noticed I was missing an arm.

A prosthetic served not only a physical function but also a mental one at the same time. If I had one, people would stop looking at me like I needed their pity. Put simply, there was nothing for me to lose by using one. There was just one problem. For some reason, I was incompatible with every single prosthetic I came across.

While I felt nothing in its natural state, the second I put a prosthetic on, my once lost left arm would begin to ache in pain. It was the inverse of phantom pain, a phenomenon where people feel pain in limbs that no longer exist.

Most phantom pain cases are chalked up to neurological issues, but there also exist instances triggered by unknown psychological factors. In my case, there could be no other possible explanation. Much to my dismay, that also made it far trickier to deal with than your average case.

"What about the range of movement? How much can you actually do with his prosthetic?"

"Pretty much everything you'd expect from a normal arm. I didn't see any signs of it using myoelectricity through the peripheral nervous system. This stuff's way too convenient. I can hardly believe it's real. Since you're the one that introduced him to me, is it safe to assume that those are the results of some sort of research on Devil Possession?"

"Unfortunately, that'd have to be a no. We haven't made any progress worth utilising on the medical front. We had the highest hopes for your sister among the Origa patients, but we've already given up on her. We can't even keep her in check anymore, much less put her down."

Now, let's just leave that ominous statement at the end aside for the moment. It's time for a crash course on Devil Possession.

'Devil Possession' is a term used to denote an infectious disease that was recognised about twenty years ago and has nothing to do with the occult.

Scientifically, it's referred to as 'Agonist Disorder'. Diagnosed as a type of brain tumour, it manifests as a form of autonomic dysfunction that causes extreme emotional instability.

Indeed, the initial symptoms of Agonist Disorder are indistinguishable from those of mental illness. Inflation of the ego, or perhaps the opposite. An obsessive fixation toward the self, paired with chronic friction against the outside world. An inability to control one's brain waves.

The inability to cope leads to the dispensing of an abnormal dose of neurotransmitters, resulting in an overwhelming amount of stress toward the brain's receptors.

Receptors are the part of the brain responsible for governing the body's course of action and continued survival. The continuous transmission of poisonous signals leads the receptors to seek out a solution, a new course of action capable of eliminating the stressor.

If the host is suffering in pain, then the body becomes immune to it.

If the host yearns for regression to beasthood, the body will restructure itself to equip those functions.

While the extent of this transformation can vary wildly, the one common denominator is that they all exceed the realms of the human body.

A physical metamorphosis initiated to prevent the collapse of the mind. What else could be capable of such a thing, if not a devil? Hence, the term Devil Possession was born.

The afflicted region that led to the secretion of adrenergic agonists is known as the lesion, while the new function developed by the receptors is known as the mutation.

Origa Memorial Hospital was a special ward created for use by patients of Agonist Disorder. Those in the care of presiding officers such as Ms. Mato would be sent there, unable to see the outside of its walls until they made a complete recovery.

This prison… or rather, hospital came at odds with human rights groups this year, forcing administration to release some patients to avoid public backlash.

They discharged two patients who were deemed fit for society: Hisaori Makina and Ishizue Arika. Then again, I wasn't exactly a patient of Agonist Disorder myself. I just happened to end up drawing the attention of Ms. Mato over here since my sister was a Ward-D patient.

"Well, we can talk about my little sister some other time. Do you really have no clue what that prosthetic limb is?"

"I don't. You know I hate dealing with things I can't wrap my head around. That includes your sister. And that kid. He's no Possessed. Dealing with him is more like… how do you put it?"

Like dealing with a real devil.

You never really heard words like that coming from Ms. Mato. I didn't want to dwell on it either, so I decided not to press her for anything else.

"He seems to not be too fond of Possessed. I've got a note telling me not to bring them up around him."

"Indeed. He harbours a strong resentment toward fakes. But despite that, lesions and mutations are a good source of nutrients for him. Have you picked up on that, Shozai? Have you realised that he's never truly satiated?"

"Hm?"

She had a point. Looking back at it, the pieces did seem to line up.

"Now that you mention it, I do sometimes hear his stomach growling even after dinner. Whenever I ask if he's still hungry, he gets all flustered and tells me to knock it off. To think his appetite was that huge."

I'd assumed he ate light because of his build, but it seemed like I needed to start feeding him more.

"Ugh…"

When I glanced up,

I saw a scowling Ms. Mato reaching for the sausage on my plate.

"I just gave you a really important clue, you know. What, do you really like Karyou Kaie that much?"

"That's... a tough question. Kaie does have a good head on his shoulders. Wait, he is pretty messed up too, now that I think about it. I kinda get the same feeling from you too. Were it not for the paycheck and the prosthetic, I'd stay as far away as I could from him. Oh, but that doesn't mean I hate his company, though. Even if there's nothing to talk about, we can both just sit back and relax. Once you get used to it, staying by his side isn't all too painful."

"Since when did you start being on first-name terms with him? Last time we spoke, you used his surname. Remember?"

"Hm? I mean, *he* was the one who told me to do it."

She shot me an icy look, as though commanding me to speak. A year and a half of conditioning under her watch meant my spine reacted even before my mind could. In the end, it wasn't the rational mind that commanded us humans, but the body.

"It happened on the way home yesterday."

◇

"By the way, hearing you call me by my surname grosses me out. Call me Kaie from now on."

Lying on his bed, an angel smiled upon me. I obviously had no way of remembering, but perhaps I'd done something to get in his good books that afternoon.

"If you say so. I'll make sure to do so starting tomorrow."

Honestly, that made things much easier for me. You wouldn't usually do that for a girl, right? This way, I wouldn't have to doubt his gender anymore. At 7:00 PM, it was nearly the end of my shift, so I waited for time to pass sprawled out on the sofa.

An awkward silence filled the room, but that was a trifling problem when faced with the comfort of this sofa.

"Hey. Shouldn't you be going all 'You can call me by my name too' right now?"

For some reason, he seemed rather dejected.

"Really?"

"Mhm."

End of conversation.

A brief, uncomfortable silence followed.

"Aren't you going to say it, Arika?"

He rustled his way to the side of the bed, speaking in an unusually docile tone. Game, set, and match.

◇

"That about sums it up."

"....."

I couldn't bear to look her in the eye any longer. I didn't have the slightest clue what law of physics was being applied to us, but somehow, the same awkward silence from my memories had made its way to the table.

"And? Did you actually say it?"

"Nah. He already called me by my name, anyway. So why would I?"

But from then on, Kaie and I made sure to always refer to each other by our first names.

"Didn't take you too long to buddy up."

With a single bite, she devoured half of the sausage.

"I wouldn't say that."

"Didn't take you too long to buddy up."

Another bite. Just like that, the bone-in sausage vanished from this world.

Seemingly still unsatisfied, Ms. Mato immediately set her sights on the next one. We'd gone straight past the realm of awkward silence and landed squarely in horror.

"I-Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Nope. I just realised that it's too late for you to cut back on masturbation. You've already lost it. If you can't sense any danger within that room, then your days

are numbered. In my case, all that means is that I'll have one less mutt to keep my eyes on. Doesn't seem all too bad, if you ask me."

"Please stop trying to freak me out. Seriously, I swear I understand what sorta place that is. Kaie's just someone who I need for his money, that's all. If things get dicey, I won't even hesitate to call for your help."

"The hell? Why me?"

"You're the one who set us up. Wouldn't that be the least you could do for me?"

"Except it's your fault for walking right into the tiger's den. Why should your safety be my responsibility? That being said, I'm not all that against doing you a favour."

Having finally calmed down, Ms. Mato now faced me with an expression of glee. Honestly, I wasn't expecting her to be so willing to come to my aid.

"Um, like how?"

"Come on, you're my breakfast partner. I'd at least be willing to do your autopsy."

Oh, that made sense.

"I promise to be more careful in the future. There. Good enough for you?"

"Just make sure you always remember. There are countless people out there whose lives are made harder by the sheer fact that you're still alive."

She left her seat, stuffing the last sausage into her mouth. While she was busy with work, I, on the other hand, had the entire day off.

"By the way, won't that upset your stomach?"

Not even the Tomato Tyrant should be capable of burning through that many bones that quickly.

"Hm? This much is nothing. I'm only about eighty percent full right now. Plenty of room left before it starts impeding my performance. See you."

She paid for her order, and only hers, right before she left. Even supposing that the Touma family's creed was to never leave any food behind, she was on a whole 'nother level.

▪

A sudden surge of vertigo washed over me the moment I stepped out of the Malion.

It was a Monday afternoon, so I didn't have to worry about Kaie today. Even heading into its second week, the August heat showed no signs of easing off. At thirty-seven degrees, any who dared walk beneath it had their energy sapped by the sweltering rays of sun.

Even the mere act of breathing seemed to be a chore in this heat.

Ah, how wicked the blessings of civilisation were. Being cut off from the gift of air conditioning felt like getting shoved off a cliff.

Then again, this heat could also be called summer's greatest charm. Once the unfiltered ultraviolet rays pierced the Earth's surface, this heat would feel tame compared to what we'd really be up against. Quite an enlightening point of view, if I do say so myself. I hadn't realised how blessed I was to experience heat so oppressive it made me want to seal my eyes shut. The best way of dealing with mental anguish was to find a silver lining. Sounded like the sorta crap a doctor in Origa would come up with.

Anyway, I decided to head to Yasakadai, two stations across.

Since it was a weekday afternoon, the train was relatively empty.

That meant fewer people sneaking glances at the one-armed passenger on the train with them. As I gazed upon the familiar scenery, I found myself feeling uncharacteristically nostalgic.

"Man, this place never changes."

I travelled this same route on every single day of school until a year and a half ago. Yasakadai Station was exactly how I remembered it. Chaotic, and just a bit dirty. In other words, no different from your average student town.

Middle-aged housewives on the way home from the grocery store, and youngsters loitering around for no reason in particular. Right in front of the station, a row of taxis sat idling. By the street was a young lady handing out tissues, while discarded flyers littered the roadside.

I would've loved to sit back and soak in the unchanged scenery. But unfortunately, it was only the town that hadn't changed in the last year and a half. I was no longer the same person I was back then.

Things wouldn't be as simple as they were on the train. Just walking down the street was enough for me to realise the difference in warmth between myself and everyone else. This was the reality of things.

"Hey, you there! Are you a student? Please?"

I didn't want to be treated like I didn't exist.

"Please let me read your fortu—oh."

But that didn't mean I wanted people to shift gears the moment they noticed me either.

"How many times do I have to tell you? Next Friday is a waning moon! An all-nighter? Hell no! Why not just take the first—"

I hated cutting into other people's conversations.

"Hey, aren't you in pain?"

And most of all, I loathed being looked at like I needed the pity of others.

◆

"Aren't you in pain?"

I stopped in my tracks.

The presumptuous fellow who called out to me was standing behind. When I looked back, I saw an unknown, yet, at the same time, familiar face. He had a dangerous feel to him, the type I didn't want to get involved with even if we did happen to be acquainted.

"Come on, just answer me already. It doesn't make sense. How are you capable of walking around when you're like that?"

He showed no signs of backing off with the tasteless questions, but my attention was drawn more to what he was wearing.

In the summer heat, he dressed himself in a hooded parka. He had his left arm out, while his right was covered by a long sleeve. Standing a head lower than me, he glared daggers at me, with his eyes still buried in the shadow of his hood.

"Have we met before?"

Because of my memory problems, asking this question was something I'd grown accustomed to.

"Nah. This is the first time we're meeting, but I know all about you. What about you? Doesn't my face ring a bell?"

He seemed oddly upset that I didn't recognise him. The fact that his voice was all raspy wasn't making things easier for me either. It sounded like he had a cold.

"Sorry, but I've been struggling with some amnesia. Does that mean you and I have never spoken before? Since you said this was our first time meeting."

He nodded in affirmation.

But he said he knew all about me. He clutched his left arm with his right, as though he were trembling from the cold.

"You're not making any sense. Just so you know, I'm not mad at you or anything. It's just, why does every single stranger I run into act like they know everything about me?"

"No shit. You're famous. Everyone in our generation knows who you are."

He didn't seem to be approaching me out of animosity. I had no idea what he was talking about, so the only thing I could really do was take his word for it.

"Well, whatever. What do you want from me, kiddo?"

"Play me. You can still swing the same way you did back then, right?"

His glare shot through me like an arrow. I sensed an intense bloodlust within his voice, one strong enough to make me forget about the summer heat for a moment. I'd seen this countless times before at Origa. A willingness to discard everything else in their lives for the sake of eliminating a single person.

"Um, you see..."

There were only two reasons I was capable of keeping my composure in this situation. First, my non-existent sense of danger.

"Please. You're my only hope. No one else can measure up to me anymore."

And second, because his bloodlust came in the form of a desperate plea. Unfortunately for him, I had no way of living up to his expectations.

"Look, I'm sorry. It's just that... I don't exactly have an arm to swing anymore."

I showed him my left arm. Had he missed it because his line of sight was obstructed by his hood? Or had he just not considered what losing an arm entailed? After seeing Ishizue Arika without his left arm, the hooded man simply stood dumbfounded.

"...Huh?"

Wait. If he hadn't known, then what was that first question even about?

"Unbelievable. Goddamn traitor. I thought we were brethren. This doesn't make any fucking sense! You and I were meant to be the same. The same position! The same beliefs!"

I heard his teeth creaking against each other.

His bloodlust now reared its hideous head. I couldn't bear to look at him any longer.

"Shit. You're an utter disappointment, Senpai. You were the one person who I thought would understand."

Leaving those bitter words behind, he promptly turned his back on me.

He staggered off down the streets, figure flickering with the heat.

He carried within him the same fatalistic aura as a junkie chasing their next hit.

I briefly considered listing him on my notepad before ultimately deciding against it. There was no way I'd live up to whatever he'd projected onto me. Without some massive coincidence and a cruel twist of fate, our paths would never cross again.

◆

I decided to head to the university for a change of pace, but for some reason, I ended up feeling oddly conflicted once I got there.

It felt less alienating here than in town, yet the surface-level freedom and order it offered were intoxicating. The words 'college life' were supposed to inspire

younglings with hope for the future. Unfortunately, they didn't hold the same effect for me.

Technically, I was still listed as a student on academic leave, so I could make my return whenever I felt like it. Then again, my memory issues would've made any daytime classes a complete waste. It was like trying to leisurely draw on the beach like a canvas as waves mercilessly continued to crash into it. The only real shot I had at making any academic headway was taking night classes.

"Well, at least it's not totally out of the question."

But that was a discussion for another time. Now that I'd had my fill of reminiscence, I cut straight across campus and attempted to make my escape before running into any familiar faces.

The green lawn grew hot with the rays of summer sun. I ran into other students every now and then, overlaying the figure of my past with theirs. I quickened my pace along the red-brick roads. Until, suddenly.

"Wait, what the freakin' freak?!"

An ungodly scream ripped through the vast space.

I looked back, recognising a familiar voice. There was no one nearby, but the cafeteria I used to frequent sat about a hundred metres away. A student by the window had shot up, abandoning her tuna rice bowl, one of my old favourites, on the table.

"Er..."

I scurried to the gate, pretending not to see anything.

But the figure barreled across the lawn and into my vicinity.

"Stop right there! Yes, I'm talking to you, the person who kinda looks like Arika-senpai!"

The clock had just struck three. If I left now, I'd make it back to the Ishizue home before sundown. This was a good chance to start getting used to living in an apartment, now that I didn't have any freeloaders to take care of.

"Quit blowing me off already! I know it's you! I can recognise your energy from a mile away! Only you could pull off that harmless herbivore vibe when you're actually a reptile!"

With short hair that matched her short trousers, the alien blocked my path forward by drifting right into it.

"What the hell? How did you end up in my school? Weren't you planning to go to some girls' school in the industrial district? What? Did you flunk the entrance exam or something?"

"Ugh. Hearing you trash-talk me like that really takes me back. Also, FYI, I *did* pass. I just decided against enrolling there for a completely different reason."

"Which was?"

"Duh. Cuz I wanted to try that tuna rice bowl you wouldn't shut up about. Obviously. The two of us running into each other here has gotta be fate," she said in a voice I'd heard countless times over the years.

This was my reunion with Tsuranui Mihaya, my high school underclassman and a resident of Planet Stupid.

◆

After being held hostage by Tsuranui's antics until ten that night, I was met by a conflicted-looking Niijima.

"Just a heads-up. Someone's in your room."

Waiting for me at the third-floor staircase, Niijima offered me a word of warning before leaving. While she... or he, rather, was always glad to offer advice, he always left others to deal with their problems themselves. I respected that about him. In fact, I wished I could be more like that myself.

I climbed the staircase, casually making my way to my room, situated at the end of the hallway.

Fully prepared to beat a retreat if someone came at me with a knife, I steeled myself and reached for the doorknob. Suppose they had a weapon more in line with modern science than a knife; what else could I do but curse my luck and give up?

I twisted the door handle and stepped inside. Walking past the kitchen with my shoes still on, I charged straight into the living room.

Within a sea of filled cardboard boxes scattered throughout the floor sat a single intruder. I could hardly believe what I saw. The gorilla squatting in my room had a pair of dumbbells in each hand, casually cranking out a set of lateral raises.

"Sup. Sorry for barging in, Ishizue-senpai."

The tall man greeted me, showing no visible signs of remorse.

His manly features that had already made him stand out back in school now made him look older than ever. Did my horoscope say I was fated to run into every old acquaintance I had today or what?

This was my first meeting with Kirisu Yaichirou, another one of my high school underclassmen, in the past year and a half. Even back in our high school days, he'd looked older than most third-years despite only being a second-year himself. And just as expected, he'd ended up skirting further into the margins of society after graduating.

"Been a while. How'd you get in here?"

"What kinda question is that? I opened the door like any regular person. There wasn't even any need to break in. Seriously, you oughta change the locks as soon as you can."

"Security's pretty slipshod 'round here. You think anybody is aspiring to rob a bunch of disabled people living in government housing? I heard the old hag over on the first floor doesn't even do her job properly. But enough about that. Have a seat."

I pointed to a random cardboard box. We both took our seats before resuming our conversation.

"What do you want from me? Don't tell me you're my new neighbour or something. You didn't wander into the wrong room, did ya, dumbass?"

"Harsh as ever, I see. I'm here to take care of some business. It's a bit of a long story, but it's got nothing to do with you."

Kirisu began to detail the chain of events leading up to today.

Apparently, some scumbag dealer who didn't respect the ways of the underworld had been brewing up a storm in Shikura until July. Because he was fine selling at a loss, his stuff spread fast, earning him the trust of the town's vagrants, which

eventually helped him build his own network. Naturally, none of the syndicates that had claimed Shikura long before he showed up were about to let that slide. Because of that, his whole operation got wiped out in no time, and peace returned to Shikura.

Except here's the kicker. Apparently, that drug dealer's name was Ishizue Arika.

"Hold up. How many goddamn people are out there with the same name as me?"

I could only pray that he didn't have the same face as me too. Word on the street was that there were only three Ishizue Arikas, so there was no need to worry about any more doppelgangers popping up.

"Uh, that guy's a fake... right?"

"No shit. I never actually met the guy, but it didn't take me long to realise he wasn't you. Made sure to tell my friends he was a fraud too. I mean, there's no way you'd put in that much effort in anything."

"Bang on, Kirisu."

Absolutely right. What a reliable and understanding friend I had. That being said, there were times when too much understanding could prove to be a hindrance.

"I take it you had a hand in his eventual downfall? Does that mean you're here to clean things up?"

"Somethin' like that. I knew for sure you had nothing to do with it, but not everyone sees it that way. So here I am to give the ringleader an earful and put him back in line. You really oughta be thanking me, y'know. You'd be screwed if someone else was on the case."

What comes around goes around. Despite having my name dragged through the mud by someone I'd never even met, there was also an old friend of mine looking out for me.

"Thanks, I guess. But Kirisu..."

I was about to question him on his ties to the yakuza before electing against it.

He'd already been tangled up with the town's vagrants back in high school, and whether he wanted it or not, he had a knack for this kind of thing. Our baseball coach used to say that no amount of muscle would turn you into a real teammate unless you poured your heart into it.

So if he was doing this out of his own volition, then I had no right to say anything about it.

"Sorry, ignore that. I lost my grip for a while there. You see, I was with some alien who constantly emits negative ions earlier today. Anyway, what happened to the fake? Did you guys get him, or did he go MIA?"

"Neither. Rest assured, though, everything's been taken care of. That bastard's never gonna be using your name ever again, Ishizue-senpai. It'll take a bit for things to fully settle down, but just give it some time."

All's well that ends well, I guess. More importantly, I had to do something about this odd tingling in my back.

"Don't you think it's about time you stopped calling me that? We aren't students anymore."

Of course, the alien was a whole 'nother case. An upstanding person like her and someone like me needed to keep our relationship vague so that things never got too complicated down the road.

"Where'd that come from? I don't remember you being the kinda guy to care about stuff like that."

"Nah, I just had a similar talk earlier. Made me realise it feels kinda gross having my friends treat me like that. That is, if you're fine with it."

"Sure, why not? This sound better for you, Arika?"

This was the sorta guy Kirisu was. No nonsense, candid, and straight to the point. As he casually brushed aside three years' worth of baggage with one easy swing, I found myself drifting back to our adolescence.

◇

If I recall correctly, it happened right after Kirisu and I first met.

I'd just joined the baseball club a few days earlier after being talked into it. With my entry came the removal of a third-year regular from the batting line-up. After having his spot stolen by some second-year nobody, he'd left the club in shock. With the setting sun casting long shadows over him, Kirisu had watched in puzzlement as the third-year's shoulders heaved with every sob. "Is he seriously quitting over that? I

don't get it, man," he said in a tone of confusion. He couldn't wrap his head around the third-year's pain.

Someone blessed with Kirisu's physique couldn't comprehend how fragile the average person really was. All sorts of anxieties weighed on the third-year. The stress of being overtaken by his underclassman, and the clock ticking down on what little time he had left as a high schooler. However, these problems were practically of a different world to Kirisu.

I shot back with an inconsiderate remark of my own.

"Want him to share some of it?"

To me, it seemed as if this cheeky first-year was jealous of the things he couldn't have for his own.

"Nah, I'm good. Besides, it looks pretty precious to him."

"Precious? You don't even get what he's going through."

"Can't deny that."

For a while, he stared longingly as our upperclassman's back faded further into the distance.

"But just look at him. How could it not be?"

That was his final reply.

Seeing how easily Kirisu and I hit it off, I decided to stick with the baseball club.

We'd promised ourselves we'd aim for that year's Summer Koshien, but I wound up staying all the way through the final summer of my high school life.

Man, that really takes me back. This was a mundane tale of our youth, set in a summer countless times hotter than this year's.

◇

"By the way, you ever heard of SvS?"

Finding myself uncharacteristically reminiscing in the past, I was drawn back to the present by a familiar word.

"Isn't SvS some retro arcade game?"

"That's MvS, dumbass. Well, that is where we got the name from. So in that sense, you weren't too far off the mark. You been around town lately? If you've seen a buncha guys crowding around parks in the evenings, that's probably it."

Nights here had gotten a lot more chaotic compared to back then. The biggest contributor to that was the groups of teens gathering at parks and open spaces.

"I've seen them from afar. So those guys are playing this SvS thing?"

"Yup. It's a simple one-box game. Been making the rounds in Shikura recently. Y'know, betting and all. Basically, it's a simplified version of baseball."

SvS, a one-on-one game built around the rules of baseball. While baseball was played with a team of nine, SvS needed only a batter and a pitcher.

Each and every match was decided by one turn at the bat. A strikeout would be a win for the pitcher, while landing a good enough hit meant a win for the batter.

With matches ranging from between two to six minutes, it was a casual ball game with simple rules. Its simplicity made it easy for anyone to jump into, even those who'd never even heard of baseball before. It was no wonder so many bystanders came to watch the games.

"Feels like a blast to the past. Kinda like the human version of a batting centre."

"Exactly. It started out as a way for us former baseball players to blow off steam. After spending three whole years dedicated to baseball, those of us without jobs or school to worry about needed some sorta outlet. That's how SvS came about. The bystanders eventually started betting on the games, which only made it spread even further. Right now, we've split them into official matches and unofficial matches. The ones you see near the station every night are the unofficial kind, purely for gambling purposes."

"....."

Youngsters who'd once poured their entire selves into baseball needed somewhere to put those skills to use. SvS was born out of a genuine desire to keep enjoying baseball even after graduation. Wherever the light shone, a shadow was inevitable. At the end of three long years, only the chosen would be able to seize honour for themselves. For those who weren't so lucky, though, it wouldn't be so easy for them to just do away with their passion for the sport.

"So, if the unofficial matches are all about gambling, then what does that make the official ones? How do those work? Is betting off-limits?"

"Nah, betting's still allowed. The main difference is that the winners get prize money. First, we create two teams of nine batters and nine pitchers. Players get picked based on their performance and popularity in the last official match, or their results within unofficial ones. The real charm of SvS is watching the two teams crush each other. The second a pitcher's ball gets hit, or the second a batter strikes out, they're officially disqualified from the game."

Hm. Simply put, it was a glorified battle royale wearing the skin of a baseball game. A primitive game without the strategy and teamwork of baseball, a single match was all it took. The only thing that mattered was surviving until the very end. It was the type of vulgar and tasteless game a bunch of kids would eat up. And yet, for some reason...

"Heh. Got ya interested, aye?"

He grinned at me, not even trying to hide how much he loved SvS.

"Feels like it'd really take off if the people running it know what they're doing. Got a set date for the games? What about the venue?"

"All depends on the players. You know how complicated things can get. Fastballs, breaking balls, righties, lefties. They all have their own matchups. There are even some players with a win rate of less than ten percent. And of course, there are also players with close to a hundred. Generally, we talk things out and decide on a venue, then call an umpire and spectators. But sometimes..."

"People lie low until they get a matchup that favours them?"

"Precisely. Standing in the box or on the mound covers only half the fight. Intel matters just as much as skill. All eighteen players get issued burner phones by the administrators. They're used to contact each other, and also as a prize for the victor of each game. Once one side runs out of players, that marks the end of the game."

"I see. What about the phones then? Considering it's a team game, they should function as some sort of counter."

"Good guess. The winning team gets prize money, and whoever tallies the most phones gets a bonus. But there's another reason why the MVP prize is so coveted

among players. It's an instant ticket to fame, y'see. Who doesn't want to become a star?"

As the game grows larger and larger, it's only natural for standout players to end up in the spotlight. Both innocent fans and jealous onlookers are part and parcel of that fame. Clumsy as it was, there was no denying that it functioned as a proper pro league.

"How'd all this even start? It'd only work if someone with a shit ton of pull was behind it. You'd need the respect of the players as well as an understanding of baseball's appeal. But even that wouldn't cut it without the authority to govern the game and talent needed to liven things up. Spill it, Kirisu. Who the hell even came up with this crap?"

"Man, is it just me, or is it hot as balls today? You got an A/C or something?"

"Whatever. What about the umpire? Do you have people on hand to play referee?"

"We do, but not every time. There are matches that kick off the moment players run into each other. When that happens, the game's integrity hinges on their pride. Oh, and the spectators help too. We've got a buncha self-proclaimed baseball fans watching recently. Cuts down on arguments about the strike zone when they're on the scene."

"Seems fishy. What about the catcher?"

"If there's someone around. Ideally, it'd be the umpire doing it. If not, we just leave the balls where they fall until the match ends. One of the unspoken rules is that pitchers always carry at least six balls, and batters always have their gear on hand."

"And the pitcher's mound and batter's box?"

"We usually treat it like a real baseball game. The main difference is they don't always have to line up directly, and the players can increase the distance if both sides agree. Putting our own spin on it makes it more fun for the audience. Truth is, building a proper mound and getting everything in the right position every time just takes way too damn long. Since the guests have money on the line, we can't exactly afford to waste their time. We do have standards, though. Letting the finals play out without a proper mound is out of the question."

"Are deadballs allowed? What counts as a foul?"

"If a beanball hits, the pitcher is disqualified. If the batter dodges it, then it's up to the players to talk it out."

"And balks? It'll be impossible to call a time-out without an umpire."

"All we can do is put our trust in each player's honour. Just like in baseball, there are no time-outs once the pitch has begun. For what it's worth, we make sure to only choose players we know for sure will play fair. No player is allowed to leave the box and mound once the game starts, no matter what their reason may be. Can't exactly complain about getting jumped and labelled a coward if you break that rule."

"No mercy for the players, huh? What counts as a hit?"

"Anything past the infield usually. By the way, flyballs are out, and grounders are counted as fouls. There can be some special rules sometimes, since there are indoor games every now and then. For unofficial matches, they've started to agree that a clean hit past the pitcher without a bounce counts as a win. Oh, and one more thing. Only wooden bats. Metal bats are banned, since they make the ball fly further. Think of it as a handicap for the batters. The game would be too skewed in their favour without it."

"I doubt it's ever gonna happen, but I gotta ask. What happens if the pitcher happens to catch a hit?"

"The batter's out, of course. There are some people out there who specialise in those plays. Those freaks are practically monkeys."

"Seriously?"

That about summed up all my questions. While there were some finer details that still escaped me, I had to admit it was well thought out. I especially liked the fact that only a chosen group of eighteen could play. Made things more interesting for both the players and the spectators.

"Pretty damn impressive, yeah? Took about half a year to get things running this smoothly. Shit's gotten way crazier now that it's overlapping with the Summer Koshien. Here ya go, Arika."

He then proceeded to hand me a golden cell phone. A number was engraved on the flashy gold plating. And unfortunately for me, it was the unlucky number four.

"The hell is this?"

"One of the phones I told you about. Gold is for batters. Come check out tomorrow's game. Oh, and fill in for me while you're at it."

"Are you shitting me?"

I had no idea how to react. Had he been plotting this the entire time?

"Why me? Cut the crap, man. Do you really think I care about baseball that much?"

"No, not really. Remember what I told you about the fake Ishizue Arika? I need you to show everyone that it's been dealt with."

"Yeah, but why me? In the first place, the fake Ishizue Arika and SvS have nothing to do with each other."

"Come on, man. Kirisu Yaichirou and Ishizue Arika settled the score in private. In order to prove that, you decided to join the next SvS game. If everyone sees you lose, that'll be enough to convince them that there's no need to worry about Ishizue Arika anymore. I'm doing this for you too, y'know? You'll have less dumbasses hounding you because of all the crap that fake pulled."

Fair enough. The logic did line up, except for one fatal problem.

"Are you blind or just stupid? Look at my arm, dumbass. How am I supposed to swing a bat like this?"

"You're missing the point. You don't need to put up a fight. Just put on some random prosthetic and throw the game."

There was no need to even swing the bat a single time if I played to lose.

"Fine, but you're gonna need to hook me up with a glove and a bat. I don't have mine on me anymore."

"Wait, seriously? But you always took such good care of your gear."

Unfortunately, a certain serial killer had sent me the remains of my bat after Touma Mato massacred her. It'd been reduced to splinters, as if to say that the same fate was coming for me. What a sick joke, right? The doctors at Origa always had a soft spot for her, so someone probably smuggled it out of the property room and handed it to her as a souvenir.

"Eight o'clock tomorrow, by the station. Better not be late. You can get your own prosthetic, right?"

"I'll manage. Should be fine for a day as long as I explain what's going on."

"Good. Didn't take us too long to work things out."

He stood up and headed for the door. For some reason, he left the dumbbells on the floor.

"I swear, man. I know how ridiculous this sounds," Kirisu mouthed, unable to leave without posing one final, unnecessary question. "You sure you won't ever play again? Heard there're some insane prosthetics nowadays."

Unfortunately, that was out of the question.

No prosthetic on the planet could withstand the hundreds of kilos of force and the over 140-kilometre-per-hour acceleration needed to swing a bat. At least, not within the purview of modern science. If such a thing did exist, then it'd have to be the work of a devil.

(8/10)

The verdant hills stretched out as far as the eye could see.

The scent of fresh grass and damp earth wafted through the air.

A vast landscape occupied my entire vision, illuminated by the summer sun. Dashing across a countryside scenery right out of a picture book, the bus leisurely made its way to a bus stop by the forest.

One night had passed since I met Kirisu. It was now August 10th, Tuesday.

I'd gotten used to being the lone passenger on the bus over the past week, but today would prove to be different.

My fellow passenger was a pale man dressed in a suit.

Of average height, he was quite thin and looked to be in his early forties. His suit was tinged in a dull grey, but even someone as fashion-blind as me could tell it cost a pretty penny.

Despite his pale complexion, his elegant features only served to elevate his dignified mood. Really made you question why someone like him was riding a bus at 10:00 AM. And on a weekday, no less.

He was clearly exhausted, his shoulders slumped and eyes unfocused. Perhaps he wasn't feeling well, and was either on his way home or to some rest house. But still, the forest was the final stop in this direction. There weren't any houses in the area, nor were there any places apt for a picnic in the wide fields.

Here we go again.

I was starting to get a bad feeling about this. Even with my faulty sense of danger, it didn't take a genius to tell I was about to witness something I really shouldn't.

Just as I expected, the man got off at Torinonori.

I waited for a bit before getting off in consideration for him, but he didn't seem to even register my existence at all. In any case, I started heading toward the reservoir, the same grey suit leading five metres ahead of me.

"Fuck me. He's seriously heading in the same direction."

While I couldn't tell if he posed any danger, I had to at least try to get some read on him.

I stopped in my tracks, out of consideration for the possibility that he was a guest of the Karyou family.

He opened the door, his figure sinking into the looming darkness.

It was then that I spent the next thirty minutes crouched behind a tree, keeping a close eye on the door.

Nothing happened. No matter how much time passed, the man showed no signs of coming out. With every passing second, the heat of the sun grew more and more intense. The sweat beading on my forehead and back was starting to seriously gross me out. Right, speaking of gross, the look on his face when he opened that door was deeply off-putting. His eyes had glistened with excitement, as though they were hawk eyes encased within glass marbles.

"I should get going. Kaie said he'd give me a pay cut if I ran late."

This was just another part of the job. I needed his prosthetic for tonight, so it wasn't something I could easily run away from. All I had to do was say I didn't see anything. I steeled myself and opened the door, making my way down the shadowy darkness.

The door was right in front of me, yet I couldn't hear a single sound from the other side.

Opening it, I emerged into the depths of the ocean. A square-shaped room, styled in the fashion of an old Western manor. Each wall had a burly door set into it, but I'd only ever used the one on the south end.

In the centre of the room was a familiar bed, where Karyou Kaie lay awaiting me with his usual smile.

"Morning, Arika. You're a bit late today."

"....."

I immediately surveyed the room. Everything was as I remembered it. There were no signs of the black dog and giant fish either. Kaie's limbs already had their prosthetics attached, saving me the effort. But there was a larger abnormality than anything else.

"Hey, did someone come in before me?"

"A couple minutes ago, yeah. A Possessed. Said he wanted me to free him."

He chortled to himself in satisfaction, the murky silhouette of his mouth curling into a crescent moon.

This was bad news. If someone as dull as me couldn't meet his eyes, then something was seriously off.

"O-Oh, I see. So where is he?"

"Dunno. Doesn't the fact that he isn't here mean he's already gone? I mean, isn't that the only logical explanation?"

Upon taking a closer look, I noticed his complexion seemed a tad healthier than usual. His skin was less pale, and his lips rosier than normal.

"R-Right. He already left, huh?"

I headed to the sofa, careful not to let him catch sight of my trembling legs.

"Who knows? He might've left this world already, but he might also still be somewhere within this room."

Kaie trailed his right arm over his torso, its glossy black surface so smooth it might as well have been lacquered. His fingertips quested downward, stopping right at his midsection.

"Wai—"

Goosebumps formed over my body. An indescribable fear took over me, like I was about to be swallowed by a venomous snake.

"By the way, you still haven't told me why you were late today, Arika."

"Eek!"

A yelp trailed off my lips before I could curb it. It's not like there was anything to be ashamed of, though. I should be proud that I didn't let out a shriek right then and there.

"Um, you see. My aunt actually... kinda got into an accident earlier."

I pulled out the most classic excuse I could come up with, one that I knew had a proven track record. No matter how many aunts or uncles I supposedly had, it'd never come back to bite me. Hell, as long as my conscience allowed it, I could kill off a dozen more on the off chance that it meant prolonging my vacation. And by that, I

meant if I had no qualms about massacring my family in my imagination. In response to my excuse, Kaie simply turned in my direction with a tranquil look on his face.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Still, she must have cared for you a great deal. After all, she chose just the right timing to go. So this is what it means to give one's life for another's sake. You and I ought to be grateful to her."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Think about it. If you had seen me, then both you and him would've ended up in my..."

He gently caressed his lips with his tongue. That single gesture was enough for me to comprehend his wickedness. The sheer shock momentarily drowned out my fear. For the first time in my life, I grasped what a spider's neurotoxin must feel like.

"Just kidding. That's enough playing around for now. Can you grab me a drink from the fridge, Arika? I'm about to die from thirst."

I made a conscious decision to stop myself from asking him why.

Rousing my numbed legs from their slumber, I fetched a bottle of juice from the fridge.

"You're quite the mysterious creature, you know? No matter how often you get the short end of the stick, you always manage to make it out by the skin of your teeth when push comes to shove. Tell me, does that make you lucky or unlucky?"

He flashed a grin, clearly satisfied at how badly he'd rattled me.

There was no need to even think for a second about how fortunate I was today.

The only fate that awaited the witness of a murder was a terrible one. I'd made a wise choice to hide for thirty minutes before coming in. Still, I knew I was constantly maintaining a delicate balance, but that didn't mean I was prepared to see my life flash before my eyes like that.

◆

The sun had already dipped, marking the end of another day of work.

When I asked to borrow his prosthetic, Kaie said he'd make a special exception for today.

"Honestly, I was planning to let you use it only once you had a clear goal in mind, so you could ease into it. Still, you've caught me in a really good mood today, so let's skip the formalities. Take good care of it, and be as reckless as you possibly can."

I had no damn idea what he was getting at. Was he telling me to push past my limits while still making sure not to damage his arm?

I took a peek at my notepad and spotted an entry reminding me to follow up on Ms. Mato's suggestion to buy some self-defence tools. The note was scribbled in a tiny, messy font, as though it had been jotted down during a bathroom break in order to dodge one's supervisor's watchful gaze.

As much as I didn't want to have to worry about the things that happened to me in the day, it didn't seem like I had that luxury anymore.

I'd lived a carefree life until now, forgetting everything that happened when the sun set. However, it was about time that I started to seriously consider how I wanted to go about things with that employer of mine.

"Whoa, what the hell is that? That's one gnarly ass arm."

That was the first thing Kirisu blurted out when he saw me, a scowl on his face.

As discussed, we met up at the east exit of Shikura Station at eight.

Couldn't really blame the guy, y'know. Since it was summer, only a real weirdo would show up in long sleeves, and unfortunately, I didn't happen to fall within that bracket. Because of that, half of my arm was left hanging out in the open, its ominous black colour free for everyone to see.

"Hmm. I figured I'd get some kinda reaction, but this is a bit more intense than I expected. Should I have covered my left arm with a long sleeve or something?"

"Nah, don't sweat it. You could probably pass it off as some sorta new tattoo."

With that, he chucked a baseball bag my way. Instinctually reaching for it with my left arm, I stopped myself at the last second and opted to use my right instead.

Around this time of night, the park had turned into an SvS hotspot.

A crowd had flocked, with about forty spectators packed right up against the arena. Another group of the same size lurked in the vicinity, either watching from afar

or sitting on the benches. Whether they couldn't find any decent spots or just wanted to soak in the vibe, however, was something I had no way of finding out. Several lights illuminated the arena, giving rise to a scenery one would never imagine for a weekday night.

"You sure the cops won't show up?"

"They did when things first started, but we're off the hook already. We have permission to use the park. Besides, don't forget that even the police are just a buncha overworked labourers. They'd lose their minds if they had to scold a hundred kids every single damn night."

Apparently, this wasn't the only venue tonight. As long as nothing too out of line took place, the police wouldn't enter the scene.

"Made sure things were less hectic tonight. Word that this is gonna be an official match only got out an hour ago. We usually give everyone a half-day heads-up so they've got time to hype things up."

The outcome of tonight's game was already determined, so a smaller crowd was actually preferable in this case. The onlookers gathered here were those who had nothing better to do with their time, showing up to make a quick buck and have some fun.

A match was already underway in the arena.

Both players looked to be around eighteen years old.

Judging from the way they were both measuring the right timing, it was clear this wasn't their first matchup. Nothing got baseball junkies more fired up than a pitcher and batter who knew each other's tricks inside and out.

The tension rippled through everyone in the gallery, with some sitting diagonally behind the batter, occupying the best seats in the house.

Most of those seats were occupied by young girls, which only served to demonstrate his popularity. Some of them even had betting tickets in their hands, proving that being a fan and putting money on it were two separate addictions.

The right-handed pitcher prepared to throw an overhand. Windups were permitted since there were no runners in SvS, but this pitcher chose to throw all of his balls without winding up.

For his final pitch, he prepared to disrupt the timing his opponent had spent the last two rounds devising. He gripped the ball between his fingers, with his middle and index finger spread out in a V-shape. One look was enough to tell the exact nature of his pitch. It was a forkball, a type of curveball with barely ten rotations per second that dropped off right before the batter's eyes. In this game, landing a hit was enough for the batter to win. There were several X marks dotted throughout the diamond, signifying that the ball bouncing within the infield marked a loss for the batter. In other words, the pitcher aimed to stop his opponent from landing a winning hit instead of going for a strikeout.

But alas, his apparent inexperience with the forkball would cost him the match. Unable to produce a sharp enough drop to deceive the batter's eyes, his pitch was struck by the bat and sent barrelling toward the hole.

From behind the batter came gasps of audible dejection. As it turned out, it was the pitcher who all these girls were here for.

"You ready? You're up next."

I approached the arena with Kirisu leading the way.

The same spectators from earlier stood in front of an orange pole.

Among them was a single gambler clearly a cut above the rest, ticket in hand.

"Absolutely unbelievable! This is exactly why you should never trust a hot pitcher! Why did he even try to throw a forkball?! He clearly didn't know what he was doi—wait, is that you, Senpai?"

It was too late to pretend that I didn't see anything now that our eyes had met.

Her casual and understated, yet unmistakably expensive, outfit made it clear she was standing on a different playing field than the rest of the other teens here. If anything, that deep mismatch was probably what protected her from being hassled by the guys around. Needless to say, it was none other than Tsuranui Mihaya, eagerly getting in on the pool.

◆

"Well? You two got anything to say for yourselves?"

She puffed her cheeks out in anger as she glared back and forth between Kirisu and me. The reason for her ire was the fact that we'd left her out of our plans.

"Cut the crap already. We're dealing with real shit here. Not the kinda thing a gambling junkie like you could wrap her head around."

"This isn't just all fun and games for me either. And woooow, you sure think you're hot stuff! Talkin' like that to someone you're seeing for the first time in a year? That birdbrain of yours has gotta be smooth as glass by now. You finally gone senile or something? You're already, like, a hundred years old, aren'tcha?"

"Hah, same ol' Tsuranui! If it weren't for all these witnesses, I'd already be kicking your ass, bitch. To this day, you're the only person who's ever made me admit defeat."

They both glared at each other, their mysterious chuckles filling the air. Back in our high school days, people often joked about the two of them being cursed to bicker for life. They hadn't seen each other since graduation, but it didn't look like that curse of theirs had worn off at all.

"I should get going."

"Good luck out there, not that you'll be needing it."

A brown-haired man stood on the pitcher's mound, impatiently awaiting his opponent. He must've been disappointed. Despite thinking he was going up against Kirisu, his opponent was gonna be some random nobody wasting time chatting up a girl.

"Hold the darn phone! You're gonna play?!"

"Hell yeah. Just sit back and watch me strike out."

"This is it!"

Her eyes lit up with excitement.

She must've figured out that we were up to no good the moment she saw Kirisu and me together. Sprinting toward the counter, she hastily bought a fat stack of tickets. Bat in my right hand, I prepared to go to the next batter's circle.

Right before I left, Tsuranui made a mad dash back to her seat.

"Dunno what you're up to, but I have high hopes for you! Give us a real crazy… a real crazy… you know!"

She sent me off with anticipation written all over her face. Of course, I knew exactly what she wanted from me.

I did some stretches at the circle, before gripping the bat in my left hand. From the gallery, I heard Tsuranui and Kirisu let out a gasp of admiration. Bet they didn't think a prosthetic could pull that much off, huh? I took a few dry swings before stepping into the box in order to make things seem more believable. Realising his opponent posed no significant threat, the brown-haired pitcher flashed a quick smirk.

It was finally time for the game to begin.

Unfortunately, it was destined to meet an unceremonious end by the third pitch.

◇

My opponent was your textbook right-handed overhand pitcher. An overhand meant swinging the arm up and throwing above the shoulder. Due to its compatibility with fastballs and vertical curves, it was the most common pitching style.

The brown-haired pitcher was cut from that exact mould. He specialised in throwing fastballs. His pitches, however, were a different story. Easily crossing the 130-kilometre-per-hour mark, they proved he was worthy to stand in this arena. At his top speed, he could probably go another 10 kilometres per hour higher. That confidence propelled the first two of his pitches right into the strike zone.

Now, it was time for the third pitch. With a grin on his face, he raised his foot without even bothering with a full windup. His form was flawless, illustrating his commitment to training himself. His core, which served as the body's axle, and his hip flexors, an indispensable muscle when pitching, both displayed remarkable strength.

Truly, I couldn't have asked for a better opponent.

He planted his foot onto the dirt. Twisting his body, he transformed it into a singular screw. Every ounce of power stored up surged from his ankles all the way to his fingertips. In an instant, the undivided force of the entire human body was condensed into a seven-centimetre ball.

Beautiful. He maintained a consistent form throughout all three pitches. A fastball pitched low and outside, thrown with unwavering confidence and power. The course of his pitch was perfect. Barring any interruptions, there was simply no way of hitting it.

Taking a step back as he released the ball, I casually shifted my centre of gravity backwards.

The game wasn't over yet. Crossing the field in a mere half second, the fastball did pose an undeniable threat. But he was no batting machine. Couldn't exactly complain about getting hit by a regular ol' swing.

"Nice try."

After all, three pitches were more than enough to adjust.

A piercing *crack* rang through the stadium as my bat came in contact with the ball.

Thus, our match came to an end in three pitches.

My opponent stood in shock, unable to come to terms with the fact that he'd just been hit with a liner.

From the gallery, I heard the sound of spectators cheering and Kirisu letting out a whistle.

"Beautiful swing! I couldn't have asked for a more painful betrayal, Senpai!"

Flinging her losing tickets into the air, Tsuranui delivered the punchline.

◆

"You're always like that! Every single time, you betray everyone's hopes at the last moment!"

We'd moved to a small neighbourhood pub.

The venue for our celebration was a place called Dining Bar Seiun.

"Sorry about that. Seriously, I didn't mean to pull that at first. But the moment I saw the guy, something just kicked in. Like the instincts slumbering within me suddenly awakened. Y'know, muscle memory and all. —Can I get another glass of oolong tea, please? Oh, and does this Italian pork shabu-shabu cold noodle

whatchamacallit have tomatoes in it? No? All right, then I'll take one order anyway—Anyway, point is, that was just a fluke. I had no intention of screwing you over, Tsuranui."

"Liar. Just look at Kirisu. He bet on you winning."

"Wait, seriously?"

"Duh. Gotta play the part, man. What better cover than betting on the batter you asked to stand in for you?"

"Whatever. Everything worked out in the end, so let's just leave it at that."

I wanted to drill into him a bit more, but it was pointless with Tsuranui around.

"In what world did everything work out? You've got one massive victim sitting right in front of you! Is nobody gonna make me feel better?! Financially better, I mean! I dumped my entire monthly allowance on that bet!" she squawked, sinking into her chair feebly.

While it was Tsuranui who dug herself into a hole, maybe I had a sliver, a microscopic sliver of responsibility for how things turned out.

"Kirisu, you know anyone that's hiring right now?"

"Hell nah. Besides, this harpy's never worked a day in her life. Well, I reckon things are gonna balance themselves out, though. Once she becomes a full-fledged adult, whatever company she joins is going straight down."

"Wow, rude much? The only reason for that is because my parents wouldn't let me get a job. Fine, I'll just ask for an advance. No way I'm owing anything to a trashbag creep like Kirisu."

I'd heard an urban legend that she'd somehow coasted ten years into the future just living off cash advances. But in the end, it was just another one of those rumours no one knew the truth about. Either her folks spoiled her rotten, or she had nerves of steel. Actually, who said both of those couldn't apply?

"What about you, Senpai? Do you have a job? If not, I could hook you up."

"Absolutely not. I refuse to ever be your private tutor again. Oh, and I already have a job."

"My, my."

Shit. I ended up blabbing my mouth off after remembering that goddamn nightmare when Tsuranui locked me up in her house.

"So whatcha do? Where is it? Is it in the city? Does it pay well? Do you get weekends off?"

"Ugh."

To make matters worse, I'd gone and sparked her curiosity. Now that things had come to this, she wasn't backing off until she passed out drunk.

"You know that huge field on the way to the airport from Shikura Hills? Somewhere around there. As for my position, I'm a caretaker. There, happy?"

"A caretaker, huh? Interesting. That's surprising. Didn't peg you for that kinda work. Wait... is it a gal?"

I immediately scrambled to deny it, before stopping for a moment to think. Honestly, I couldn't even say for sure that he was a man. Hell, I wasn't certain he was even human.

"Ohoho!"

Her eyes began to glisten with excitement. This was the second time in a single day. Seriously, was she a *yokai* or something?

"I take it you'll introduce her to me sometime soon? Also, didn't know you could still swing a bat. You're garbage compared to back then, though."

"Same. How the hell'd you even do that? Didn't you tell me it was completely off the table just yesterday?" Kirisu interjected.

Their gazes gathered upon the prosthetic on my left arm.

"A single swing's the best I can do," I hastily said, unable to reveal the truth. Then again, I was no different. I barely knew anything about this prosthetic either.

"Enough about me. I've been meaning to ask, what the hell happened to Koala last year? I heard they got absolutely destroyed. Something about a ten-point lead?"

I brought up what I'd heard last week.

As far as I knew, both Koala Hills and Shikura High were said to have fielded the strongest teams in their history last year. Koala even constructed a new annex for the baseball club, sparing no expense for victory.

"Wait, you haven't seen last year's matches?"

"It turns into a civil war over the TV when you're stuck in the hospital. Not that I would've watched it, even if I could. Just spit it out already. What happened?"

"Beats me. Not my shit to deal with. All I know is that they changed their starting line-up."

"Their ace was pulled out on the day of the match. They let a second-year pitch instead, but he ended up messing up like crazy."

"Meaning he was in his first year when I was still around, huh? If I recall correctly, his name was… Sekura Yumiya, right?"

"Yup, that's him. The Sekura family's golden child. Honestly, he was a pretty good pitcher in his own right. Going from relief to starter overnight? Can't blame him for messing up."

Kirisu and I simply listened along.

Apparently, Koala had been in a slump since then, barely clawing their way back to the top four this year.

On the other hand, our alma mater, Shikura High, had mellowed out after last year. It was now a place where you played casual baseball for the kicks. In the end, that was the only possible outcome for a team shouldered entirely by a single prodigy.

For a brief moment, we all sank into a nostalgic silence at the mention of Shikura High. After that, it was Tsuranui's turn to pose a silent question.

"I never got the chance to ask you. Why'd you quit baseball, Senpai?"

"I wouldn't say I quit. The opportunities just kinda dried up. Isn't that how it goes after high school?"

"I guess. Did you ever consider going pro?"

"Hell no. That was never what we were aiming for. Right, Kirisu? Did *you* ever think about going pro?"

"Nope. Not even once."

We nodded in agreement.

While we both had a passion for baseball, such thoughts practically never crossed our minds. Kirisu especially was dead-set on his ways, which often put him at odds with our hard-ass coach.

"Isn't the most important part of sport just playing a good game? I don't get why people lose their minds so much over results."

On one certain day at the end of practice, I remember hearing Kirisu mutter such a thing in frustration.

We were happy enough just playing baseball. Kirisu always believed that victory came secondary to having fun. And it was because of him that Ishizue Arika continued to swing his bat until the very end.

"So you're done with it for good? What about you, Kirisu?"

"Same, I guess. Just seems kinda difficult to keep going. Besides, obsessing over a single thing in this day and age is outta the question. There are a shit ton of other ways we can enjoy ourselves."

"Well, yeah. But still, we had lots of fun, didn't we?"

Tsuranui was right, as she always was. Our passion may have faded, but those days we spent devoting ourselves to baseball were the real thing.

Despite his claims, Kirisu didn't start playing because he had nothing better to do. He might not've had the makings of a pro, but the reason he could sacrifice everything else and offer his entire youth to baseball was because of his love for the sport.

"No point dwelling on the past anymore. That dream's over now."

Another one of Kirisu Yaichirou's greatest strengths was knowing when to let go.

Having no qualms about cutting off lingering attachments, he had a surprisingly mature outlook for a nineteen-year-old. In fact, one could even say that he was a bit too mature for his age.

◆

After walking Tsuranui to the industrial district, Kirisu and I headed back to the station.

I intended to head home, while Kirisu had other business to take care of. Silence filled the air. The truth was, both he and I had taken some pretty serious damage from Tsuranui's question.

"Tell me, Kirisu."

"What's up, Ishizue-senpai? Better not ask me something stupid."

"Sharp as hell, huh. Also, I told you to drop the 'senpai'. Are you really sure you're done? Have you given up on baseball completely?"

During Kirisu's final summer, I'd spent my days within the confines of Origa Memorial Hospital. I never got to see the conclusion he alluded to earlier for myself.

"I'm done. Just like that dumbass said, our days in the baseball club were the most fun I'd ever had in my life. I didn't have any intention of going pro, nor did I have the talent. But I wanted to keep playing forever if I could. One day, it just hit me. I wasn't like the rest of 'em. I realised I'd only last 'til the end of high school. Any longer, and I wouldn't be able to keep lying to myself."

"Things are different now. You have SvS."

"When the games started, I decided that I'd never take part in them myself. Just like tonight, I had someone take my place every other time. I haven't stood in the box since the summer of my third year."

When he said he could only keep playing until the end of high school, he meant it. Just as always, he had an almost obsessive dedication to keeping his word.

"But why? Is it your pride as a former baseball club member that's stopping you?"

"Nah, none of that crap. Truth is, my life as a batter ended in the fall of my second year. Looking back at it now, the only reason I kept playing until the end was because I was too selfish to let go."

I couldn't bring myself to pry any further.

Before I knew it, we'd arrived in front of the Malion. Arriving at the apartment, we both stopped in our tracks.

"One last thing. It's too late to back out now. Now that you have a game under your belt, you've officially become a player. I'll make sure everyone's on the same page, so all you have to do is enjoy it. The golden four is the mark of a king. Anyone who

stands at the top has no right to turn challengers away. Keep that bat on you at all times so that you're always ready."

"Crap, I totally forgot about that. You sure I can keep this?"

"I've got more than one, y'know. And I already told you, I won't be needing them anymore. There're three pitchers left this round. No one knows where their ace is right now, but he'll show up eventually. Now that you're in it, you'd better play to win, slugger."

He waved me off, walking away.

I took a good look at the bag he'd handed me. For something he called unneeded, he'd sure taken good care of it.

▪

With one uneventful week down, we were already halfway into the second week of August. Little did I know that the peace I'd been taking for granted was already coming apart at the seams. As usual, Ishizue Arika was always left outside of the loop. Yet that never seemed to stop me from stumbling straight into messes I didn't even know existed.

4 / Sinker. (Top)

▪

It was another day of suffocating heat, the temperature pushing past thirty degrees.

Yet again, he awakened in the midst of a piercing cold.

He fell to the ground as he scrambled to catch his breath. Panting as though he had run out of oxygen, he raked his chest with his left hand in a desperate attempt to hold himself together.

The pain of his nails gouging into his flesh dragged his awareness away from its murky stupor.

He was within the midst of an overgrown thicket in a certain city park. This was where the nuisances of society eventually drifted off to; the place they called home. As he finally roused himself awake, he looked up to see the painfully azure sky. Fragile rays of sunlight spilt down over him.

The August sky was tinted in a vibrant blue, misleading the perception of those who witnessed it. Right now, the sun seemed as though it was within reach.

Yet, within the radiant splendour of summer, the cold gnawed at him all the same.

Each laboured breath came more erratic than the last. For all the heat he generated when pitching, his body temperature had now plummeted to an inconceivable level. Every day was a constant battle with a prison of biting cold. However, he had already grown accustomed to this. After all, the August sky had frozen over for him long ago.

"I messed up. Goddamnit… I need… to get home."

He desperately tried to recall the place he called home. Having only just awakened, his sense of personality remained buried deep within. Any memories of home, and even his own name, escaped him.

Within the cold, only his raging anger continued to smoulder within him. His fragmented consciousness was akin to that of a drug addict's, robbing him of his sense of self and judgement.

All he could rely on was his burning fervour toward pitching.

What surfaced first were not memories of who he was, but those of his body. A single tool, built for the sole purpose of utilising rotation in order to throw a ball. He had shed his humanity in the distant past, leaving behind a machine capable of producing only a single motion.

Indeed, he had dedicated his entire lifetime to improvement.

Whatever time he could've spent developing the skills he needed to survive—what could've been a life lived regularly as a human, had all been poured into baseball.

With a single twist and release, he enclosed his entire being within a single ball.

As every joint in his body ceaselessly lost what meagre semblance of humanity still remained with every repeated motion, so did a mountain of corpses continue to pile up.

A fluid interconnection of his body and mind.

Countless cheers celebrating his glory morphed into a single unrecognisable sound, spurring his spirit forth.

The prison of biting cold sought no less than victory from him.

Abandoning his last scraps of self, he fed the ball with bloodlust in the midst of the unending ovation.

So whenever someone asked who he was, he simply laughed it off, describing himself as a singular screw.

"Next. Anyone will do... I need another..."

The persistence he once used to masquerade his weakness now burnt just hot enough to move his frigid body. The unending cold that plagued him disappeared whenever he came face-to-face with a batter. A frozen-over, cloudless sky. Nothing had changed since then.

Everything was still as it was the day he lost everything eighteen months ago.

The summer would only ever continue onwards, oblivious to all that had been left behind.

"Six more. Six more, and I can finally go home."

With his hood back in place, the devil's pitcher crammed his parka with as many balls as it would hold.

◆

It took four sacrifices before he earned the moniker of Sinker.

During his first and second games, none were present to witness the sheer inhumanity of his devil's pitch. For the third, an umpire was present. After witnessing his pitch crush the batter's skull, she made sure to warn as many people as she possibly could. Many laughed it off as an overreaction, but it only served to spread the rumours of a murderous underhand pitcher even further.

Which brings us to the present, with the fourth player. He had brought several members of his crew with him to the scene of their battle.

"You're the underhand fucker I've been hearing about? You're the talk of the town now. You sure you wanna do this? Remember, I don't have a phone. Nothing good's gonna come outta beating me."

The opponent he chose was a batter who only took part in unofficial SvS matches. However, he would prove to be no less of an opponent than any other batter. The only reason he never made it to the official match was due to his unbefitting conduct.

"If you say so. Consider this a favour for an old friend. I wanna see that crazy breaking ball everyone's losing their shit over."

The man accepted his challenge out of carelessness and pity for the hooded pitcher. He was dressed in shoddy clothes, with his limbs seemingly trembling in fear. Any who witnessed this sight would have questioned the credibility of the rumours.

As for the fourth batter, he chose a hardware store as their arena after being approached by Sinker on the street. At 11:00 PM, there were just under a hundred cars parked in the vicinity. Hidden in a dead zone of the city and lit only by streetlights, six spectators had already gathered.

"I know those rumours are just a load of crap. Still, better safe than sorry," he said, as the rest of his crew laughed impishly.

All six of them were friends of the batter, and he'd called them on short notice before he arrived at the venue.

Seven versus one. At this point, he'd already been sentenced to an execution by numbers. Regardless of the outcome, the odds tilted in the batter's favour. Thus, for the first time, the murderer hunting for his next target found himself cornered instead. A strong wind swept through the parking lot, with no obstructions present to weaken it. Hood fluttering with the breeze, he retrieved his first ball from his pocket.

"Hm?"

The seven men could only look on in bemusement, perplexed by Sinker's unshaken composure. This was their last chance to notice that his trembling limbs, once the subject of their pity, had gone perfectly still.

The game began with the bystanders' unwitting laughter as its backdrop, before coming to a close by the fifth pitch.

To be precise, the game was already over by the third. There was no need for an underhand. A sidearm into his devil's pitch was all he required to strike the batter out. But as expected, the spectators rejected the verdict. They ruled the third pitch a foul tip, extending the same excuse to the subsequent fourth.

In baseball, a foul ball refers to a pitch that has been hit but instead flew to the backstop due to an improper swing. It usually counts as a strike, unless there are already two strikes on the batter. In other words, as long as he continued hitting fouls, the batter would never strike out.

On the fourth pitch, his bat failed to touch the ball at all. Nevertheless, that didn't stop the onlookers from branding it a foul tip.

Finally, the fifth pitch.

"Ah, so that's how you want to die."

As they said, his pitch took a sharp turn beside the batter, mimicking the trajectory of a glancing hit.

The truth was, his bat didn't even graze the ball.

Despite that, the ball flew off as though he had hit a foul tip.

It sank deep into the batter's chest, consigning him to an eternal slumber.

The spectators could only watch, dumbfounded as he fell to the ground.

After a brief silence, they surged toward Sinker in white fury.

Thus began the execution.

Without averting his gaze, Sinker took a step away from the mob and spun another pitch.

This time, there were two screams. With no window to adjust his stance, he was only capable of hurling a 100-kilometre-per-hour throw. As luck would have it, that was more than enough power than he needed. The ball flew toward the two men, before mercilessly crushing their jaws. In the next instant, they both fell to their knees, shrieking in agony, desperately trying to hold their jaws intact with their hands. With their hands now occupied and grappling with the pain of their dislocated bones, they instantly lost any remaining will to fight.

Two down, four to go. To Sinker, they posed no more of a threat than a flock of sitting ducks. It was a simple game of human pinball.

Men who struggled to sprint at a mere 10 kilometres per hour stood no chance against his pitches.

It took three pitches in total. After decimating the group of six, the devil's pitcher heaved out a long, white sigh.

"What an utter waste of my time. I'm gonna be home late because of you useless halfwits."

Clutching his trembling limbs tight, the hooded murderer slithered into the summer night. Within the parking lot, only the fading echoes of his victims' screams filled the air.

▪

On the second week of August, as summer reached its peak, a wave of deaths loomed over Shikura City.

Falling onto the rails due to the commuter rush, a tragic accident brought about by careless driving, food poisoning traced back to a company's contaminated milk, malnourishment resulting from domestic abuse, and even a mass suicide set off at someone's instigation.

When tallied together, the cases amounted to at least one accidental death per day. The Sinker murders were initially treated as a special case among them, but following the incident at the hardware store the previous night, they were reclassified as a string of assaults caused by juvenile delinquents. In the end, however, it wasn't deemed significant enough to warrant a task force.

Despite barely making it out alive, the fourth victim had yet to regain his consciousness due to the severity of his injuries. The six other juveniles present at the scene had suffered crushed jaws and gave consistent testimonies identifying a sole attacker.

Although the suspect's identity remained unknown, witness statements indicated he was personally acquainted with the fourth victim. Investigators therefore elected to hold off until the victim's recovery. On August 12, the Juvenile Division of the Community Safety Department set off a manhunt for the suspect, advising him to surrender.

"Fuckin' dumbass. You're making life harder for everyone."

It was the noon of the same day when word made its way to Kirisu Yaichirou's ears. The day before, he went to go talk to the so-called bystanders in order to make sure they kept their mouths shut.

On the day, he'd explained the situation to a trusted comrade, seeking help in suppressing the baseless rumours circulating online and throughout the city about Sinker's killing spree. After a short break at his usual cinema, he navigated his way around the nighttime streets. A day had already passed since the point of no return.

Walking through the downtown area, he often heard the word 'Sinker' being uttered by several groups of delinquents in the vicinity. With the passing of the third and fourth games, people began to refer to him as that in reverence and fear.

With a hood over his head, he delivered a 140-kilometre-per-hour pitch that bent at a right angle. All who faced him would meet certain death, regardless of whether they struck out or attempted to escape before that. There was but a single way to survive—to send his pitch back.

"What a buncha bullcrap," Kirisu snarled loathingly.

Still, it made for quite the good scare. Perhaps one might even rejoice at the birth of a new name within Shikura's summer ghost stories. Except there was one problem. That same murderer was tearing Kirisu's business apart.

"That fucker Nishino's gonna hound my ass tomorrow, no doubt about it."

Things had spiralled out of control, but not to the point where SvS had to be dissolved.

His higher-ups had taken quite a liking to it. Thanks to its safety and its ability to easily generate gambling revenue, Nishino Harusumi had no reason to dismantle it. If there was something for him to fear, then it'd be the possibility that Kirisu Yaichirou might get involved with the police. Regardless of how many children fell victim, or whatever happened to SvS, it'd just be another day in Nishino's life.

"Seriously. Had to be baseball of all things?"

Back in the day, there were two prodigies in Shikura said to possess the power to kill with a baseball.

One of them was a pitcher from Koala Hills, while the other was a batter from Shikura High.

However, these stories circulated almost exclusively among fellow players. To a mere spectator, Koala's genius may have seemed to be no more than an average pitcher. The truth was, only those who had stood within the batter's box could truly comprehend the extent of his talent.

Although he lacked the right-angled break of Sinker's signature pitch, he possessed the ability to create the illusion that he had done so. His perception allowed

him to predict his opponents completely, while his boldness gave him the courage to discard those predictions when he saw fit.

To top it all off, he possessed the ability to make a batter hallucinate their worst nightmare—being hit with a beanball.

Even though he had never thrown a dead ball in an official match, every batter who faced him saw their lives flash before their eyes at least once. Henceforth, the rumours that he was genuinely out to kill his opponents were born. Many doubted the reality of the stories told about him, only to find themselves trembling with fear after striking out.

His favoured delivery was sidearm, with his physique resembling the so-called Sinker. Any player who had offered their high school years to baseball would inevitably conjure his image upon hearing the rumours.

Whether the police had gone to question him was still unknown to Kirisu. He'd barely made it in time to stop the witnesses from divulging vital information to the police.

He intended on handling the situation himself, asking them to keep the specifics of Sinker's pitching style amongst themselves. As all of them had personal vendettas against Sinker, they agreed to work with Kirisu and misdirect the police.

Then again, that much information would be unlikely to change the police's approach.

"They ain't that stupid. There's no way they'd come to that conclusion. No, maybe they might go and hear what he has to say."

The genius pitcher in question left Koala's starting lineup in the summer of his third year and hadn't held a ball since then. Apparently, he'd injured his elbow. Years of countless breaking balls, dating back to his time in the Little League, had accumulated an immeasurable toll upon his joints. Those who knew him mourned the loss of his immense talent yet were unsurprised by his inevitable injury. After that, he never appeared on the news again. Among those involved in the scene, consensus gradually formed that he'd abandoned baseball altogether.

"....."

A genius pitcher that wouldn't stop until he broke down.

What was it that gave him such an unmoving fixation? Was it his mind of steel that pushed him toward injury? Or was it his superhuman talents that led to the eventual destruction of his body?

Kirisu couldn't wrap his head around why anyone would willingly submit themselves to such torment for the sake of baseball alone. The notion was so foreign that just contemplating it pained him.

To him, baseball was a form of recreational enjoyment.

Passing out from exhaustion and quarrelling with teammates was just another part of its charm. Because it was a team game, individual fulfilment and communal satisfaction were inseparably entwined. In fact, even all the messy hierarchies that were part and parcel were something that Kirisu enjoyed about it.

The only thing he couldn't comprehend was the pain that accompanied it. Sports wasn't something you could enjoy while pushing past suffering. At that point, it was no different from a roundabout form of martial arts. Going at it head-on would've been a more efficient and simple way to settle things in that case.

For players such as those, there probably existed something that superseded enjoyment. A reason to devote their souls to a single sport. Most pursued such devotion for themselves. Cases like those were simpler. But sometimes, there were those who ran for the sake of others. As it happened, Koala's genius pitcher was one such player.

"Talk about a heavy cross to carry. If only you'd just played for yourself."

As he sank deep into thought, Kirisu found himself at his destination before long.

In this ten-storey building on the outskirts of Yasakadai, which was filled with karaoke rooms, the fourth floor served as a makeshift detention centre utilised by Kirisu's group.

This space functioned well as a hazy locked room; it was both closed-off and unprotected at the same time. One could peer inside the rooms from the hallways, but it was an unspoken rule to never interfere. Renting out the entire fourth floor, he utilised this place as though it were a hotel. There were twenty rooms available, with some occupied by runaway teens and anonymous juveniles currently on the run.

Showing his face at the reception, he headed to the elevator. Arriving on the fourth floor, he was greeted by the long, narrow corridor typical of buildings like this. Circling the exterior of the floor, he took three turns and headed into the room situated furthest within.

"Sekura, it's me. I'm coming in."

He pushed the door open without awaiting a reply.

The room, large enough for ten people, was dimly lit, with the air conditioner blasting at an unpleasantly low temperature.

On the table sat several dishes, food scattered messily about them.

Finally, in the corner of the room, a lone hooded teenager sat curled up, hugging his knees tight to his chest.

"Good, looks like you've been eating. By the way, you need to watch the temp. I'm on the clock here. If a client dies on me, my rep's the one getting dragged through the mud."

Turning the lights up, he began to clean up the dishes on the table. The entire time, the boy simply held his shivering body tight as though he were freezing.

His name was Sekura Yumiya, a third year at Koala Hills and the sidearm ace of their baseball team.

"You hear me, Sekura? Turn the AC up, man."

"No one told me… no one told me this would happen. All he said… was that he'd let a devil possess me. I didn't want to lose to him… that's why I asked for a stronger arm. Please… this isn't what I wanted. I didn't know I'd die if someone hit my pitch!"

Sekura directed his gaze toward Kirisu. It was quite the sight. Put simply, he was in a state too terrible to even look at.

His entire body was devoid of moisture. His lips were horribly chapped, with thin red veins crawling all over his face and neck. From his bloodshot eyes, one could easily tell he hadn't slept in days. But most notably of all, his left arm that'd been covered with a cloth was twitching and convulsing on its own.

The truth was, Sekura Yumiya's arm had a third joint that was capable of expanding and contracting like a digestive tract. On the day Kirisu accepted his

request to shelter him, Sekura revealed the full scope of the symptoms he'd been suffering from.

In principle, human musculature is limited to contraction and relaxation. While they did possess the ability to be stretched, that was something only made possible by an exterior force. Under no natural circumstance can muscle tissue actively lengthen through its own power. However, Sekura's arm made that fantasy a reality.

He'd wished for a breaking ball so unreachable that no batter could so much as brush its wake, and this distorted body of his was the result of that. Even in this very moment, the inhumane new organ within him ceaselessly writhed in anticipation of its release.

◇

While Sekura Yumiya and Kirisu Yaichirou weren't total strangers, calling them friends wouldn't be apt either. They were both familiar with each other, but that didn't mean they had any active association.

Kirisu was one of the creators of SvS, while Sekura was a star player whose fame only spread further among the masses after taking part in the games.

Though his friends were mainly in it to gamble, Sekura himself was motivated by his love for SvS. So much so that he'd started putting it ahead of his own baseball team.

A pitcher of legend who'd gone undefeated for the past half year, he was granted a silver cell phone engraved with the number one this season, the mark of an ace. He was blessed with both wealth and talent.

Sekura Yumiya used to be someone who could've had whatever he wanted, yet he was now no more than a fugitive on the run from society.

"I've been possessed by a devil."

Hearing those words from him on the phone, Kirisu's first instinct was to express his disbelief.

"Are you shitting me? Someone like you would never end up like that."

Having witnessed several mild cases of Possession, or rather, Agonist Disorder himself, Kirisu couldn't take his words as anything but a joke.

"They're dead. I killed them. My pitch killed all of them."

After listening to the entirety of Sekura's story, Kirisu accepted his troublesome request. It'd now been close to a full week since he went into hiding here. From the day he took shelter within this room, Sekura would periodically circle back to the same outlandish story.

A group had gathered at the construction site of a delayed multi-tenant building, intending to hash out the season's SvS pitching roster. On that day, a strange man had appeared out of nowhere and approached them.

"That sounds fun. Say, would you mind letting this old man join you?"

As far as anyone was concerned, he was an utterly unremarkable middle-aged nobody—save for one crucial detail. Upon introducing himself, the man claimed to be a devil.

"Just do that one little thing for me, and I'll grant any wish you so desire."

Those strange, performative words were as far as Kirisu knew.

Sekura refused to divulge what happened after, only repeatedly claiming that he had been possessed by a devil.

◇

"Come on, Sekura. Spit it out already. What was that bastard's name?"

"I fucking told you already! I don't... I don't remember. It was an ordinary name you'd hear anywhere. Shit! I didn't know losing meant I'd fucking die! Enough bullshit already! 'This ball holds the same weight as your life?!' What the fuck does that even mean?!"

He violently tore at his left arm as he spoke.

In spite of his discomposure, he hadn't completely lost sight of himself. No, in the first place, he bore no wound capable of driving him to self-destruction. The sole cause of his anguish was the deal he struck with a devil.

This was what the self-proclaimed devil had told him: "I shall give you a wonderful mutation. But from this point forward, you must proceed with absolute caution. The instant your pitch fails to find its mark, your life will be forfeit. That arm of yours possesses the power to transcend any batter, but make a single wrong move and it will devour you whole."

That moment marked the rebirth of Sekura Yumiya's arm.

Those otherworldly abilities of his were proven by the existence of a devil who walked right out of a fairy tale.

"I just want to go home already, goddamnit! I can't even pitch anymore! How am I supposed to throw a ball when a single fucking hit means I'm six feet under?!"

For someone who'd been considered an ace pitcher until just the day before, being unable to throw a ball was nothing short of torture. Perhaps he may have been able to accept it if his curse was that of certain death. Unfortunately for him, he was granted a devil's pitch that could triumph over any batter. He would never lose again; no bat would ever be able to send his ball back.

Nevertheless, inconceivable as it was, the fear of that impossibility had already taken root in his mind. Now, he couldn't bring himself to even grip a ball.

"But if I... if I just... them all... he promised he'd fix me. Right, I should just ki... all of them. Wait... but what if I lose? If I lose... then I'll..."

All of Sekura's incoherent ramblings eventually collapsed into those same words. The devil that appeared before him had wrapped itself completely around his mind.

"A devil that grants people's wishes, huh? Was he wearing a hat, by any chance?"

"A... hat? Wait... how do you...?"

"Cuz I've run into that son of a bitch before. Why else do you think I believed all of your bullshit?"

"Then... did you also...?"

"Hell no. I ain't that stupid. But my buddies fell for the same scam you did. They wished for an unhittable pitch and a swing that'd always hit a home run. Buncha dumbasses. Should've asked for something more realistic, like improving their rates and defence. In the end—"

They all met the same cursed fate.

A single bad pitch spelled death. A single strikeout spelled death.

There was no enjoyment to be found in their baseball. Kirisu had never been able to understand why his friends were willing to gamble their lives for the game.

"Just so you know, you got off better than they did. At least you were offered something in return. The asshole wasn't nearly as generous with us. All he did was take and take."

The devil in his memories was incomplete, one capable of only pillaging others.

"Kirisu, what happened to those two after?"

"You tell me. Everyone dies sooner or later. By the way, you haven't been sneaking out, have you? Shinohara died two days ago. You two knew each other, right?"

"Hahaha."

Sekura's face contorted spitefully as he snickered. Despite knowing what his laughter signified, Kirisu chose not to press any further.

"Get a grip already. You don't have much longer. Your contract's gonna run out at the end of the week. Four days. That's all you've got. End up in a jail cell somewhere or die a pathetic death. That's your choice to make."

"No... w-where else can I go? Right, what about Nouzu? I heard there was a shelter for Possessed there."

"Forget it. The Delusion Complex's the stuff of fantasy. Think about it. You really believe a place like that actually exists? A word of advice as your acquaintance. Just give up and head home. There's no way in hell you're getting out of the prefecture with Agonist Disorder. Keep this up, and you're gonna rot to death."

Turning the lights down, Kirisu headed for the door, seemingly unconcerned.

"Damn it... why does it always have to be me?! What the fuck do I do?! No... wait. I can still be saved. Right, it's not too late for me yet. I just have to... I just have to kill them all..."

Lurking in the frigid darkness, a lone Possessed sat repeating the same words over and over again like a broken record.

5 / S.VS.S-2

(8/13)

"Yo. Morning."

10:00 AM, as the second week of August drew closer to its end.

The moment I stepped into my workspace, that underground room—I was met by a mysterious object wrapped in a ribbon.

For some reason, it felt more like a time bomb already ticking down its final minute. There, resting against the monochrome tiles, sat a single sixty-centimetre package.

"Ah, you're finally here. Hurry up and put my arms on already. I've been waiting for you since last night."

The dark silhouette, sprawled across the bed, thrashed its non-existent limbs in a fit of impatience. Beneath the sofa lurked a black dog, while the shadowy outline of a shark glided gracefully across the ceiling.

Opening this door never failed to dampen my spirits, but today felt particularly bleak.

First, I had to fulfil my employer's command and attach his limbs. Then, I would spend the rest of the day indulging his every whim, only to strip him of his prosthetics again at sunset. That was my workday in a nutshell.

"Don't just stand there like a dunce. Come on, open it up already! You'd better give me a good reaction, too. I had to go out on a limb to get my hands on this, and it only just arrived last night."

He waited with bated breath, looking for all the world like a kid at an amusement park. Despite myself, I felt a flicker of warmth at the sight, though I still had to steel my nerves as I reached for the wrapping.

"I've got a bad feeling about this. Better not be a severed head in here."

I opened the box with a hesitant hand.

"Wha...! Th... this is impossible!"

I blinked, unable to trust my own eyes.

It was nothing short of a miracle. Resting inside the package was a useless relic—a piece of technology long lost to the annals of time.

◆

"What the hell are you two doing?"

Roughly an hour later, at eleven o'clock sharp, Touma Mato waltzed in without so much as a knock. She glared down at the two delinquents sprawled on the bed as if they were nothing more than common livestock.

"M-Ms. Mato?! B-But why now?! Your timing couldn't be any worse!"

My voice cracked, the words barely finding their way out of my throat.

The moment she entered my field of vision, I was struck by her thorny, arresting beauty.

With her jacket draped over her shoulders, she stood with the rigid posture of a dictator surveying her subjects. Her stare alone carried a crushing weight—an aura of authority so absolute it threatened to sear my vision for eternity. Just holding her gaze was enough to make a small-time taxpayer like me fold on the spot.

The dog that had been napping under the sofa retreated deep into the shadows, and the silhouette on the ceiling vanished entirely. Were they afraid of her, too? In the blink of an eye, the midsummer aquarium had lost forty percent of its glow.

"Oh. Good morning, Ms. Mato. It's been a while. Hold on. Have you gotten fatter again? Your waist looks thicker than I remember. Honestly, you never learn, do you? You're at the age where you really ought to be watching what you put in your mouth, you know?"

On the other hand, my superhuman boss didn't budge in the slightest, firing back with his trademark smirk. Guy had nerves of steel, I had to hand it to him.

"Morning to you both. I see you haven't changed either, Karyou. Just looking at you and this dump makes my skin crawl. At least that halfwit over there seems to

have kept my warning in mind. Now, I'll ask again—what are you two up to? I don't see anything here worth this much fuss."

"Here. Do you seriously not know what this is?"

Kaie pointed toward the relic on the bed.

In response to Ms. Mato's mounting displeasure, he had lobbed back one of his usual tactless remarks. I couldn't have asked for a better partner.

"Hm? No idea. Is that a plastic model… of a baseball field?"

"Did you hear that, Arika? Get a load of this ignorant fool! Seriously, now. Enough with the jokes. You were born in the seventies, weren't you?! How do you not know what a baseball board is?"

Kaie shook his head in disappointment.

Inspector Touma could only frown in silence, momentarily robbed of a reply.

In an instant, Kaie had transformed this otherworldly realm into a minefield no sane human would dare cross. At that moment, I swore I'd master his ways someday.

"Um, Kaie? Are you really sure you should be provoking her this much?"

"Point taken. It would be poor form to leave her standing there the whole time. Please, have a seat, Ms. Mato. Oh, the sofa is off-limits, by the way. That's Arika's spot. Now, I told you, didn't I? It's my turn to go on the offensive. Top of the sixth! The Karyou Divas are bringing in a relief pitcher!"

Unfortunately, the atmosphere was so thick I couldn't exactly pipe up with a cheer.

Ms. Mato silently closed the door, only to realise the floor was the only other place to sit. After a moment's hesitation, she ignored his command and plopped herself down on the sofa anyway. Was I seeing things? Did our beloved Tomato seriously just do that? For a split second, did she actually look at Kaie like a startled puppy, worried that he'd explode in rage?

"Eyes on the game, Arika! I told you, if you win, I'm giving you a bonus. You'll never turn the tables if you don't get your head in the game!"

"Good point. For the sake of my life expenditure, I'm going to crush this amateur who doesn't even know the rules. Don't forget, Kaie. Your relief pitcher can only use that disappearing pitch six times."

Ms. Mato leaned back, placing one hand on the sofa and another onto her face. I felt like she might shoot me if I stared a second longer, so I snapped my attention back to the board.

Now, about this baseball board.

This deluxe edition that Kaie had gone to hell and back to acquire was the final line still in production even after the culture of baseball boards had been annihilated from the face of the earth.

As the name suggested, the pitcher would throw a tiny silver ball while the batter tried to hit it. It was a bargain-bin facsimile of the real sport, equipped with haphazard digital elements to help it compete with the rise of video games.

For instance, the fielder placements were randomised, and the power behind each swing fluctuated depending on the player. In addition, there were seven teams worth of data inputted within the system, giving each of them their own special quirks. Seriously, did they really have to go through all that effort?

Kaie had chosen a team built on pitching and defence, while my star player was a pinch hitter with a high home-run probability.

"Are you sure? Shouldn't you sub him in now? He's at the bottom of the lineup. This is your best shot to rack up points while you have the chance."

"You just don't get it, do you? I've got nothing to gain by burnin' my slugger here. The whole point of a cleanup is to get the most mileage out of your fourth batter. Baseball isn't that simple; it's not just strikeouts and home runs. The real game is about using every second of your turn to slowly move your pieces into position."

As my batter connected with the ball, Kaie let out a low groan.

He'd been operating under the assumption that strikeouts and homers were the alpha and omega of the sport. His pitching, in particular, was sloppy—he treated every ball as nothing more than a way to burn the count. Despite angling them slightly toward the inside and outside, every pitch he threw sat well within the strike zone.

Frankly? He was serving them up on a silver platter. The only reason I'd let him lead until now was to drive up the stakes.

"There's a method behind balls. No matter how perfect your pitch's course may be, you'll never strike a batter out without throwin' them off balance. A ball is an effective way of misdirecting the batter's predictions. It's absolutely not just a pitch that missed the strike zone because the pitcher couldn't control it. Well, that can happen from time to time depending on the pitcher's skill."

One foul tip, and then another.

The count was now two strikes and three balls. In other words, a full count. Should the next pitch be a strike, then the batter was out. If it was another ball, then the batter would proceed to first base.

Pitcher Karyou, a tranquil expression on his face as he released the ball.

It came barrelling toward the heart of the strike zone, exactly where most shots in a game like this tended to land. But at the precise moment the bat should have connected, the ball vanished into the floor.

Thirty years ago, back in the golden seventies, one momentous breakthrough had redefined the world of baseball boards forever: the disappearing pitch. It was the birth of the forkball in a game that had known nothing but fastballs.

With the press of a button, the ball would dip beneath the surface—a nasty gimmick that guaranteed a strike if the batter chased it. However, because it technically never reached the catcher's mitt, a patient batter could simply lay off and take the ball.

"And that's a ball. Batter takes first base. You're way too easy to read, Kaie."

"Darn it. Figured you'd be kind enough to fall for it. By the way, why is the disappearing pitch always a ball? Do forkballs miss the zone that much in real life?"

"Man, you really don't know squat. Forkballs are usually strikeout pitches, but that doesn't mean they're automatic balls. Like I said, pitching's all about outsmartin' the guy in the box. If all you've got in you are breaking balls and straights, you'll never get into his head."

A lightning-quick fastball was a powerful weapon, no doubt. But leaning on a single trump card only meant you'd be figured out eventually.

In the end, every pitch and every swing was just a manifestation of possible human motions—a reflection of one mind against another. A pitch thrown by a human could always be countered by a swing from another, and breaking balls were one of the tools used to obscure the perceived reflection.

"Interesting. So most other breaking balls actually *do* find the strike zone?"

"Duh. Even a straight's a breaking ball, when you think about it. The natural movement of a baseball is to fall downward. By putting a backspin on it and generating friction, you build up pressure on the ball's underside. Spinning it in a direction opposite to its course creates lift, through which a pitcher can bend the ball however they want. You know how an actual ball has those seams on it? They keep it from being perfectly round, giving the pitcher something to work with to cheat air resistance."

The match continued to unfold as I walked Kaie through the fundamentals. By the eighth inning, the Ishizue Stray Dogs were steadily padding their lead.

"There are all kinds of breaking balls, aren't there? Curves, shootballs... What about vertical and horizontal breaks?"

"There's no such thing as a purely horizontal break. As I said, the natural tendency of a ball is to fall. No matter how great the pitcher, that's the one maxim that will never change. Curves give you a lot of leeway, but they come with a sharp drop-off once they break. Shootballs tend to bend inside when thrown by a right-handed pitcher. They're tough to pull off overhand, so they're usually the bread and butter of sidearmers. Sliders, as the name suggests, slide directly to the left. Since the velocity is close to a fastball, they're the perfect money pitch for a clutch spot. Those are better from a sidearm slot, too."

"I see a pattern. I've heard overhanders were the kings of the mound. Oh, does that mean they have more power? So they'd be better suited for straights, right?"

"Pretty much. In terms of top speed, it's not even a contest. That forkball you keep tossing out for no reason? That's an overhand staple. Along with split-finger fastballs and cutters."

"Cutters? That doesn't sound very baseball-y. Does it peel your skin off when it hits you or something?"

"Pfff..."

I desperately tried to hold back my laughter. How do I put it? It was, well… a surprisingly cute thing to say.

"'Course not. It's called a cutter 'cause of how the pitcher 'cuts' his delivery, but its full name is actually a cut fastball. It's basically a sliding straight, so it even got the goofy little nickname of poor-man's slider."

Despite the endless catalogue of breaking balls, every single one of them was born from the movement of a pitcher's elbows, wrists, and fingers. Those who specialised in breaking balls often paid for it in blood, their elbow joints ground down by the heavy burden of the rotation.

"Wow, there really are tons of them. I thought they just curved or fell. With that many options, doesn't the pitcher have too much of an advantage? I mean, all a batter can do is stand there and wait."

"On paper, sure. But remember: the pitcher is human. By reading their fingerwork and form, you can identify most pitches the instant the ball is released. Everyone has their quirks, but there's a baseline to it all. You can disguise the course of a pitch but rarely the type. Curves and shooters come from a twist of the fingers, forkballs from a snap of the wrist, and cutters and sliders from a slight tilt. Oh, and don't forget the disappearing pitch."

"Wait, what? That's actually a thing?"

"You bet. What people usually mean by a disappearing pitch is a knuckleball. It moves erratically through the air because the pitcher kills the spin entirely—it only rotates about twice per second. Compare that to the thirty-plus rotations of a typical breaking ball, and you realise how much more air resistance it's fighting. Of course, you sacrifice speed, but in return, you get a monster that even the thrower can't fully predict. Meanwhile, sliders and shootballs tend to be thrown at high speeds. But… damn it. I actually forgot. There's one more."

The absolute trump card of a sidearmer. A pitch with a vicious downward bite that overhanders simply couldn't replicate.

"The knuckleball is erratic, sure, but it's still easy enough to follow with the eye. Because of that, you can't really put it in the same bracket as the disappearing pitch in

this game that just blinks outta existence. But there is a breaking ball that disappears right in front of your eyes—a pitch that looks like it could only be the work of a devil."

My mind drifted back to my high school days. I recalled a certain pitcher I'd seen in the stadium several times. An underhand delivery, skimming so low it seemed to crawl along the dirt. A supernatural ball thrown inches off the mound, soaring through the air like a flying fish.

"It's called a sinker. As you might guess, it's a pitch that literally sinks. After rising into the air, it nosedives right in front of the batter. A truly elite sinker doesn't just drop; it straight-up vanishes from your field of vision."

Suddenly, a sharp *clack* echoed from the sofa. She'd been maintaining an awkward silence the whole time, but something had finally hooked her.

"The more you know. Sinker, huh? Has a nice ring to it. Sounds like the start of a good urban legend."

Meanwhile, Kaie's eyes were practically sparkling.

Having poured a period of my life into the sport, I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride at their reactions.

"Oh, you think *that's* cool? I'm only just getting started. When a lefty throws a sinker, it gets an even better name: the screwball."

"Wha...! I can't believe this! I had no idea baseball was this deep! What about batters? They've gotta have something cool too, right? A guillotine? Or a chainsaw?"

"Afraid not. We batters don't get anything wild enough for textbooks. A few guys have nicknames for their forms, but it's nothing compared to the pitchers. Man, those lucky bastards get all the legendary monikers—Screwdriver, Cleaver, and whatnot. They're humans, not cyborgs, for god's sake!"

Despite complaining, I couldn't help but feel a bit giddy.

We were getting far too engrossed in the talk and neglecting the game, but Kaie looked like he was picturing some monster pitcher cackling as he mowed down a lineup. As long as he was having fun, I didn't mind, though.

From the sofa, the young lady in her twenties watched us with icy disdain as we let our inner children loose.

"Wanna give it a shot? I know it's not your thing, but it's way more fun than it looks."

"No. Stuff like that stresses me out. Let me know when you two are done."

What did that even mean? All you had to do was press a button to pitch and another to bat.

"That's not what she means. She just doesn't handle chummy and laid-back very well. Mostly because the moment she enters a room, she tends to destroy the mood entirely," Kaie interjected, a smile of absolute bliss on his face. Ms. Mato averted her gaze in silent defeat, unable to muster a rebuttal.

"By the way, how do you know so much about baseball? I've never heard you talk this much in one day. Wait, are you one of those baseball nerds?"

"Ugh."

I'd messed up. I'd gotten carried away and started lecturing again.

"Not really. I wouldn't even call myself a fan. Just random trivia I've picked up."

"He used to be in the baseball club. Pinch hitter all the way to graduation, no less. Though, he did have a few other things on his plate back then."

And of course, she had to choose the worst moment possible to launch her counterattack. Ms. Mato leaned forward, revealing the one secret I'd intended to take to my grave.

"Really? I had no idea. What does she mean by 'a few other things,' though? Did you not give it your all? I always thought baseball didn't leave room for that kind of half-hearted approach?"

"You ain't wrong. But even without endless practice hours, anyone can be a pinch hitter if they use their time wisely. Grinding on the field doesn't automatically translate into skill, y'know?"

I didn't mind the whole team culture, but I couldn't devote my entire youth to it either. Besides, I simply didn't have the time.

"Dimwit. Time spent practicing is skill. When else are you gonna grind your body into dust if not during your youth? Making good use of your time? Don't make me laugh. That's a luxury for people who actually know how to use their heads. You hear me, Shozai? The only way to get through to imbeciles like you, who don't know

themselves, is to grind them down over and over. Don't stop even if they start throwing up on you. Don't let up even if they literally stop breathing. Complete and utter domination, nothing less. If they're too thick to get it through their skull, then beat it into their bones. That's the only way."

"Ugh." "She's nuts."

Us two scaredy-cats on the bed blurted out in unison.

I really should be thankful. If she'd been on staff at Shikura High, Kirisu and I would've died on the field back then.

"You'll end up overworking yourself like that. What's the point of all that practice if you end up destroying your body? There's only so far that guts can take you."

"What, you think I'm making this up? Good God. Seriously, I figured this was something every athlete worth their salt already knew. You really are half-assed. I don't even know how, but you somehow made it this far without ever laying the proper groundwork. Time for a quick lesson, Shozai. Repetition is the backbone of motor skill development. By firing off the same signal over and over, the central and peripheral nervous systems that run your muscles start to lock onto that pattern. Think of it like paving a road on the new shortcut you discovered. Drilling your nerves through repetition boosts efficiency, letting you instinctively perform motions faster than you can consciously process. At least within schools, the coach is the only one who really needs the technical know-how. You see, athletes learn with their nerves, not their brains. That's what I mean by learning with the body. You literally program yourself to improve through relentless practice."

"That… makes sense. Just one thing, we're talking about athletes here, not Pavlo…"

"What? Got a problem with what I said?"

"No, ma'am. So that's why there are specialists who excel at a single form. They've trained the same reflex over and over like their lives depended on it. Damn. Guess anyone can hardwire their spine if they grind hard enough."

How scary. I started to consider the possibility that Ms. Mato had a subordinate who would become her meat shield on command.

"Not quite. The cerebrum develops most rapidly around age ten, which means you start seeing gaps if basic motor skills aren't acquired within that time frame. Repetition is an efficient tool, but it only really pays off during that narrow stretch of your life. Basically, if you want to become a specialist, you need to wire those reflexes in before you hit ten. Despite that, there are athletes who succeed without going through that effort. What else could you call them but half-assed?"

Ms. Mato shot a glare in my direction. I'd been on the receiving end of all her jabs today.

"Wait, doesn't that mean there's even less reason to work yourself to death? If repeating stuff stops paying off after ten, I mean."

"Why do you always look for the easy way out? All it means is that you have to take a different approach to practice. It may seem contradictory, but the development of muscles comes after learning technique. Unlike nerves, the prime window for building muscle only opens after puberty. That's when you start working out to strengthen your body. Needless to say, any time spent practicing from middle school to college should be allocated to physical conditioning instead of mental development."

I had to admit, she was right. In other words, you had until ten years old to build the necessary foundations of an athlete.

Meanwhile, the reproductive system tended to mature between fourteen and twenty, right in the middle of puberty. That was why trauma planted during the teen years was so hard to shake off. One had to pay close attention, or they ran the risk of ending up with things like domestic violence, family slaughter, and binge eating. Then again, no amount of vigilance would be capable of preventing cases like that.

Our heated game of baseball thus came to an end before the ninth inning.

After a massive comeback by the Ishizue Stray Dogs, the Karyou Divas were unable to score any more points, leaving a humiliating X on the scoreboard.

"I'm parched. Make me something to drink, Arika. You can use the mixer in the kitchen."

Walking past the bathroom, I made my way to the kitchen. I was over the moon about getting my bonus, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd basically ripped off a kid who was probably younger than me.

"So, what brings you here, Ms. Mato?"

Satisfied despite his loss, Kaie called out to her while lounging around in bed.

"Spare me. You know there's only one reason I'd ever show up here. You have a request for an exorcism."

As she leaned forward with her fingers locked together, she suddenly muttered an unusual word.

Exorcism. Not exactly an everyday word, but it wasn't completely unheard of either. What was unusual was the fact that it came from an expert on the Possessed, Touma Mato. There was no way of curing Possession—of curing Agonist Disorder. Wasn't that the conclusion I'd come to? The same answer she'd drilled into me during my year and a half at Origa Memorial?

"From whom? Did they request my assistance through the proper channels?"

"No. It's off the books. Illegal, too. The client wants you to erase evidence of a certain crime."

"Wha…"

My right hand, occupied with the task of sloppily slicing apples, locked up mid-slice. This whole time I'd had Ms. Mato pegged as a government hound through and through! What the hell was this all about?!

"Did my family have a hand in this?"

"Good guess. Your grandfather asked me to hear the client out. You've heard about the serial killings around Shikura these past two weeks, right?"

"I have. Something about there already being four victims? Is the culprit a Possessed?"

"Seems like it. Let's call him John Doe for now. So John is a participant of this street game called SvS, and… What's that, Shozai? Why'd you yelp all of a sudden? Was there a worm inside that apple or something?"

"How rude. Of course not. I keep good care of all our ingredients. We haven't had bugs here in ages. Anyway, enough about that. Go on, Ms. Mato."

"R-Right. John's parents are convinced that their son has something to do with the murders. Because of that, they asked your grandfather to help bring him back before word gets out to the public. Apparently, he hasn't been home since before the serial murders started. They were about to report him missing, but then they heard the news. At that moment, everything lined up for them."

I had no clue how his parents jumped to the conclusion that their son was a serial killer, but they must've at least had some reason to feel that way.

Besides, that was none of my business. I delivered the freshly blended mix of apples and spring water to my boss like a personal butler.

"Here you go, Kaie. Oh, and goodbye, Ms. Mato. This sounds like serious business. Feels like I shouldn't be eavesdropping on it."

"Don't be such a buzzkill. You're gonna forget it anyway. Stay with us, Arika."

"Who said you were allowed to leave, Shozai? Left to your own moronic devices, there's no telling where you'd end up wandering off to. By the way, you know about SvS, don't you?"

She sent a glare in my direction. In hindsight, I should've held that scream in, even if I had to stuff my mouth with an apple. When I heard her say the word SvS, my vocal cords gave in to the fear of what'd happen if she found out about me being a player.

"Well, I know the gist of it. It's like a simplified version of baseball."

"Same thing's written on the file. The culprit's a pitcher taking part in the game. He waits until his targets are alone, before challenging them to a match and killing them in the process. His true identity is still unknown, with barely any witnesses to work with. There's a name people call him, though—Sinker. He always makes sure to strike the batters out before ending their lives. What a sick freak. Why go through all that trouble?"

She was the type that never wasted a single shot when she hunted her prey, so the concept of defeating them before taking their lives was something she couldn't comprehend.

"Is it really all that bizarre? We've all got a secret kink or two that we don't want others finding out about. Right, Ms. Mato?"

I couldn't believe that Kaie had just hurled such a terrifying question at her. He had to stop doing this while I was around, or I'd end up losing my life before long.

Still, I had to admit.

"That's a good point. Does that mean Ms. Mato's secret kink is sadism?"

"Huh?"

There our dear Tomato was, looking at me in pure astonishment.

"Enough with the insults. How could something I don't even bother hiding be a secret?"

Personally, I was of the opinion that the world would be better off if she at least tried.

"Back to SvS. Ever since this guy showed up, it's turned into a game of death. They have these things called official matches. Sinker's been targeting the rest of the certified batters, so they're all cowering in fear right now. Shozai, you sure you're not sitting on anything else you haven't told me?"

"I swear I had no intention of keeping this from you, okay? Um... I kinda wound up becoming one of the official batters."

"....."

"....."

Her stare was about to tear a hole in my skin. Despite being utterly exasperated at my sheer misfortune, she also seemed oddly convinced. It was a gaze of resignation, as though she'd just accepted I'd somehow wandered into another mess.

"All right, we can talk about Arika's sob story later. What do Sinker's—this John Doe's—parents want to do about him?"

"They want you to get hold of him before we at the police do and deal with any physical abnormalities. Also, they've asked for you to eliminate the root cause of his infection if possible. God, this is the problem with parents who spoil their brats. They're absolutely convinced that someone out there infected their kid on purpose. And to top it all off, they're hell-bent on making this phantom person answer for it."

I did see where she was coming from. Agonist Disorder had no way of travelling from one human to another. Being around a Possessed wouldn't be enough to turn you into one yourself.

More importantly, I could've sworn she just mentioned something about treatment.

"Um, Ms. Mato? Have you guys finally discovered a cure?"

"Nope. What do you say, Karyou? Feel like doing it?"

"I'm always ready to deal with fakes, but as you can see, I'm unable to leave this place. If you just bring him to me, I'll take care of the rest."

"That's out of the question. We've got eyes on him already, but there are way too many civilians nearby. Having me on the scene will just get things messy. We need the exorcist to head there in person and handle it on-site."

"How about this, then? I'll send a proxy. You ready, Arika? You're the only one I can count on," he said in a carefree tone of belief.

"You've got all the info you need, right? Show us you're worth keeping around," she said in a casual tone of authority.

"How the hell'd you two jump to that conclusion?! Absolutely nothing from that conversation suggests that this is a good idea!"

"There's no need to worry. All you have to do is put on my prosthetic and go have a word with him. If things don't pan out, you're free to walk away. So how much did they offer, Ms. Mato?"

"Hm? About this much."

Ms. Mato proceeded to fetch a check from her pocket.

I shouldn't have looked, goddamnit! Right before my eyes was a number that made every last drop of danger and absurdity feel completely inconsequential.

"I don't really need the money, but I wouldn't mind splitting it with Arika. Can you cash it in for me when everything's over, Ms. Mato?"

"Sure. But keep this between us."

As much as I wanted to object to splitting the money, even half was well within my acceptable range.

"One more thing. If you can prove yourself worthy of my trust, I wouldn't mind lending you my arm. No need to get my permission or come to return it. For as long as you're capable of carrying out my jobs for me, that arm will be yours to keep."

The dark shadow flashed a smile gentler than anything I'd seen from him before.

Enough money to live for three years and the prosthetic I'd been searching for all along. To hell with it. No amount of death flags would be enough for me to resist this temptation.

◆

Receiving the prosthetic from Kaie, I mustered up my courage and fastened it to the stump of my left arm.

"Good luck. This'll be your first job. Take it easy, and don't bite off more than you can chew."

With those words as my cue, I left the underground room.

Waiting for me beneath the glare of the midday sun was Touma Mato, who'd headed out just ahead of me.

After agreeing to the job, she'd given me a concise rundown of what it entailed. I already knew where John Doe had holed up and where his family lived. All I had to do was make contact with him and make sure he knew his parents wanted him home. I couldn't deny that it scared me. But if simply talking to him was enough, then I had every reason to do it.

"Shozai. Remember what you said just now? Are you really sure there's no such thing as a pitch that curves straight to the side?"

For some reason, Ms. Mato circled back to baseball instead of the assignment.

"Absolutely. You hear people talk like that all the time, sure, but you're never gettin' a pitch that curves like that, however you spin the ball."

"If you say so. But what about a pitch that changes course in mid-air after breaking once?"

"Even an amateur knows the answer to that, Ms. Mato. I feel like I'm gonna hate having the answer, but, is that how this Sinker guy throws?"

If so, that could no longer be called a baseball pitch. There was no other way to put it. It would have to be, quite literally, a pitch possessed by the devil.

"Yup. After zooming past the batter, it curves twice horizontally before caving in the skull of whoever tries to run. Viewed from above, the ball's trajectory resembles a ↗. Does that help?"

"This crap's so off the rails that it's making my head hurt instead. Anything else I should know?"

"Let's see. I haven't reviewed the files personally, but I was told the balls recovered from the bodies had their surfaces completely scorched."

Were his pitches capable of making such sharp turns because there was enough spin to set the ball on fire? Nah, that wouldn't do it. Even if there were some undiscovered grip capable of forcing that kind of trajectory, it still wouldn't explain a second shift in mid-air. Did the axis of rotation somehow flip from vertical to horizontal? If so, we were moving into the realm of telekinetic sci-fi.

Possession might transform the human body, sure, but it didn't grant you the power to physically manipulate an object once it left your hand. Could it be mental, then? Was he somehow distorting his opponent's perception? No, that wouldn't hold up either. After all, everyone else watching saw the exact same thing.

"Well, at least he's been keepin' indoors lately. No need to worry about suddenly having a ball thrown at me. But more to the point, this means SvS has become a real problem now, right? You guys plannin' to take it down after all this?"

"As much as I'd love to, those conniving bastards have been careful enough to not break any laws. They've been giving proper notice, and there hasn't been so much as a traffic violation."

Fair enough. The best the authorities could do was tell them off for staying out past their bedtime.

"Hold on. I've got it. I just have to crush the system myself. Say, Shozai, is there any chance I can join the game as a pitcher? I'm pretty confident in my—"

"Hell no. I'm pretty sure you'd end up pitching live rounds into our skulls instead."

In response to my prompt comeback, Ms. Mato simply scowled in disappointment. See, the problem with her was that sometimes she'd show her cute side.

"The game gives batters a massive advantage, so someone like you might actually help even the playing field. Last I checked, there were fewer pitchers than batters in SvS."

"Hm? What do you mean by that?"

"Our bats make for good weapons. If a fight breaks out, we can just use them to kick everyone's asses—Nah, just kidding. It's cuz pitching is generally considered a much steeper climb. It takes a hell of a lot more practice. Batting is easier to pick up, so there are tons more of us."

Waving goodbye, I set off toward the bus stop. I could've hitched a ride on her Mercedes AMG SL55, but I wasn't really feeling it right now.

"I'll ring you the second we're finished, so I'd appreciate it if you stayed close. You go on drives during the job sometimes, right? God knows how screwed I'll be if you're over in Wonderland when I need you."

"Cut the sarcasm. I don't have the courage to waltz into a place like that alone. Here, take this. Don't hesitate to use it if you feel the need. I'll make sure it's filed as self-defence."

Touma Mato fetched a menacing knife from her trunk and offered it to me.

"Um..."

As much as I appreciated the gesture, all it did was underscore how serious the situation had gotten.

"Crap. Jumped the gun again."

Despite the words, my defective sense of danger meant I still didn't feel particularly threatened. I fished out my golden phone and took a peek at the clock. It had only just turned noon. Meanwhile, below the time was a date I wish I hadn't seen—Friday the 13th.

▪

A few minutes' walk from Yasakadai Station brought me to the ten-storey building that housed my target.

From a distance, it looked like any other unremarkable office block, and the first floor had a lobby not too unlike one you'd find at a hotel.

However, the building's true form was a sprawling complex of karaoke rooms, something you saw fairly often these days. It was an artificial paradise, created solely for the sake of karaoke. A sealed-off microcosm where eight hundred people could sing their lungs out simultaneously. I couldn't think of a place more devoted to the worship of music.

John Doe was hiding on the fourth floor, in Room 20. According to my intel, he'd been occupying the largest room, tucked as far from the elevators as possible, for nearly three weeks.

On the first floor, the doors were open to anyone, regardless of age or gender. Again, this place was a man-made paradise of indulgence. Nobody batted an eye at the fact that it was still broad daylight, and on a weekday no less. Anyone forced to acknowledge such a reality had no business here.

I headed straight for the reception, stepping into that world of glamour and song.

"Welcome, sir. Will you be by yourself?"

"I've got a friend waiting inside."

"We hope you enjoy your time with us."

"Thanks."

Two elevators sat at the far end of the lobby. I stepped inside and immediately hit the button for the eighth floor. Only after the doors slid shut did I press the button for my actual destination: the fourth. I'd worried the floor might be restricted, but the car moved without a hitch. For a supposed den of wayward youth, the security was surprisingly lax.

I appreciated the pragmatism. In my experience, delinquents obsessed with stuff like passwords and keycards were twice as thick-headed and four times as troublesome.

Seconds later, the elevator halted at the fourth floor. It was noticeably dimmer here, the muffled drone of a radio bleeding into the corridor.

A long, narrow one-way path spiralled away from the elevator—a track-and-field course where the start and finish lines were the same, except a wall cut you off before you could complete the loop. A truly miserable hallway of dead ends that perfectly mirrored the lives of the people inside.

From the south side where I stepped off, the path was a labyrinth: west until the wall, then north, then east, then south, and one final turn west to reach the end of the floor. I practically had to pace the entire perimeter before I'd reach Room 20.

Red carpet blanketed the floor, and black wallpaper smothered the walls. Anyone walking in blind would have been creeped out; with just a little more effort, the place could have moonlighted as a haunted house.

Even with a rumoured serial killer lurking nearby, Shikura City had no shortage of places that made this look tame. Still, my dysfunctional sensors reminded me of the stakes: if I got cold feet now, I could kiss my naps in Kaie's room goodbye.

I made it past the first turn.

To my left was a wall of windows darkened by blackout film; to my right, a row of identical doors leading into karaoke rooms. I passed seven of them, all unoccupied.

Now for the second turn.

On the other side, wearing a flat, unreadable expression, a vicious murderer was waiting for me.

Splat.

▪

"What the fuck are you doing, man?!"

I threw myself backwards, my life practically flashing before my eyes. The vicious, uh... care bear had just tried to silence me without even trying to talk things out!

He'd fired off a brutal three-hit combo aimed at my face and gut while I was strolling in, blissfully unaware.

For the record, this mysterious creature's true identity was Kirisu Yaichirou.

"How did you dodge that, asshole?!"

Somehow, *he* was the one getting worked up, despite being the one who threw the first punch. He must have been real proud of that cheap shot, bearing down on me like a predator. The second I'd rounded the corner, his opener was supposed to put me out of commission, and the follow-up should have sent my stomach into orbit.

Unfortunately for him, he'd failed to account for the fact that his target was every bit as unpredictable as he was.

"Shut the hell up, man! How should *I* know? I've probably just gotten used to being roughed up way worse than that!"

I'd like to say I was just matching Kirisu's energy, but in truth, my better judgement had simply left me behind. It was that raw adrenaline rush you got right after swerving to avoid a speeding truck.

And so, without questioning each other's presence or bothering to talk it out, we both fell naturally into our stances. Kirisu dropped into a practiced boxing guard, while I thrust my right arm out in a desperate bid to broker some kind of peace.

"....."

"....."

After a few seconds of a bloodcurdling stare-down, Kirisu finally raised his hands in surrender.

"I'll be damned. This new stance of mine's actually pullin' its weight."

Hooray for world peace! God bless the human mind!

"What's your damn problem? You're gonna get fucked in the ass if you try to bargain like that. Watch yourself next time."

Despite the warning, there was no enmity left in him. Kirisu wasn't the type to pull punches just because we were friends, so his sudden stand-down caught me genuinely off guard.

"This isn't making any sense. Are you really Kirisu?"

"You would've died if I'd fucked up."

"Then I'd really appreciate it if you didn't fuck things up. Jesus, what have you even been up to this past year and a half?"

"What's scarier is how casually you're asking that. If I hadn't backed off, you would've gladly taken me on, wouldn't you? In that case, neither of us would be able to hold back. I can't say for sure who would have screwed up first, but it wouldn't have been worth the mess. And so, here we are. 'Sides, I've already earned my keep tonight."

Having fumbled his initial ambush, Kirisu must have decided an all-out brawl wasn't worth the trouble. I had much to learn from him.

"So, what brings you here? Got business with my guest back there?"

"I'm here on a job. His folks want him to know he's missed back home. Unfortunately, I'm under orders to talk to him face-to-face. I won't stick my nose into whatever you're doing here, so just hurry up and let me through."

"Whatever, man. Get your ass moving. I'm outta here. Try not to fuck things up too badly."

With that tossed over his shoulder, Kirisu sauntered toward the exit.

From somewhere down the corridor, I heard the elevator chime.

I could more or less piece together why he'd tried to jump me, but now that he'd left, he was no longer my problem. Which meant roughly eighty percent of my job had already sorted itself out. Now, all I had to do was talk to the target.

Letting my guard down, I carelessly turned the third corner, before—

"—Ah."

I thrust my hand up before realising I wouldn't make it in time.

A white projectile was searing a line through the air at 130 kilometres per hour, aimed directly for my skull.

At the far end of the hallway lurked the silhouette of a left-handed sidearm pitcher.

It was a textbook submarine release—a pitch that would skim just inches above the floor before rising sharply into the batter's line of sight.

But this was no breaking ball. Instead of the expected screwball dip, the ball stayed its course, slamming into my head as if propelled by some invisible, driving force. This time, there were no crafty narrative tricks to hide behind. The unshakeable truth was that Ishizue Arika had collapsed onto the red carpet.

(↓)

The anguish of resurrection defied the confines of mere words.

This was an experience beyond the perception of man—a reality that had no right to exist within it. The incomprehensible suffering threatened to rob me of my sanity. I awakened to the howling of a beast and the sensation of my brain rupturing. Of course, that was little more than a figure of speech. The brain itself is incapable of feeling pain; it merely translates the body's destruction into cold, hard numbers. No, the true source of pain was my left arm.

The right hemisphere of my brain, the half that governs the left side, creaked under the strain.

My human consciousness began to shriek, unable to comprehend the sheer contradiction of nothingness aching.

I was alive! Alive! ALIVE!

What was once dead had been granted breath once more.

Pain was proof of my existence, and its shackles provided a sickening, stomach-turning pleasure.

The simultaneous being and non-being of my flesh birthed a delirium of omnipotence.

Just as the nonexistence of God grants Him immeasurable omnipotence, the existence of devils grants them boundless impotence.

Counterfeits are born from the genuine; their falsity allows the original to attain completion, eventually swallowing the imitation whole.

My cranium had once been crushed by the devil's grasp, yet nothingness had since overwritten that truth with the order of reality.

And in the moment of my rebirth, I saw it: a black mass of loathing, howling in the joy of its own creation.

(↑)

I awoke to the sensation of a red-hot poker being thrust through my left arm and directly into my brain. Of course, that was little more than a figure of speech. My consciousness was merely waking to a pain that posed no immediate threat.

There I was, lying flat on top of the red carpet. My left arm, aching with the burden of existence, was melting into the ground.

Of course, that was no figure of speech. The prosthetic, once attached to my shoulder, had morphed into a turbid, black mass that stretched dozens of metres down the hall. At the far end of this shadow crouched a dark creature—canine in shape. It was hungrily squelching away at something limbed, frothy gobs of saliva bubbling from its jaws. A few seconds more of this tireless frenzy and that chunk of flesh would be ground into a pile of Pedigree Chum.

Ah, the dog was devouring what remained of a creature that was once human.

"AAAAHHHH!"

The lump of meat thrashed its head with every shriek that tore from its throat, bashing its skull against the floor over and over in the same frantic motion. At this rate, it would pulp itself before the beast could finish the job.

It tried desperately to shake the beast off, but its left arm had already ceased to exist. From this distance, the rest of its body looked like stew left to boil for far too long.

There was just one problem here—the dog was coming out of my left arm.

"Huh? Wait… hold on."

In a few more seconds, it'd all be over.

Whatever the mouth claimed would remain its own, but the undigested remnants would bleed back into me. The scraps deemed unfit for its stomach would erode Ishizue Arika's body through that connection.

"Wai... you need to stop!"

Chomp. Chomp. Chomp. Why'd I have to end up with such a wilful pup? The beast showed no sign of obeying.

"Enough! If you bite its head off, it'll... it'll die!"

No response.

My bizarre prosthetic had transformed into an otherworldly monster and was now on a total rampage.

To be honest, I wasn't all too surprised.

Deep down, I felt oddly reassured by the truth. No wonder this arm suited me so well. I felt a spark of awe at the sheer abnormality of its true form.

"No, but... if you eat that... it won't..."

It won't taste any good, so you shouldn't bother.

"Right. The knife."

I pressed the blade Ms. Mato had given me against my upper arm and drove it straight into the prosthetic.

That was all it took. The transient sense of omnipotence I'd been granted was ripped away in an instant. The underlying framework of the arm—the logic I thought I understood—faded into static. Drawn in by the beast, the black mass vanished. The mutilated lump was released from the mosaic, regaining its form as a pristine human body.

".....Gh."

I was left heaving pathetically on the floor. I'd figured I wouldn't feel a thing, but the agony of losing the arm tore through my nervous system regardless.

"It... hurts... damn it."

A cold sweat broke across my skin, my body rattled by the agony of an arm that had no business hurting and a wave of nausea surging through my chest.

Seemingly concerned for its provisional owner, the black dog trotted back toward me and began to sniff at my side. I take that back. It wasn't worried about me

at all. The only reason it ran in my direction was because it smelled something tasty. Right, Kaie had mentioned it once before. The dog was blind.

"Hey, what the hell are..."

I looked up, only to find the creature had vanished without a trace.

The only thing remaining on the red carpet was Karyou Kaie's prosthetic, lying disconnected from my shoulder.

▪

The one who'd put a ball through my skull was none other than the target himself.

Sekura Yumiya, a third year at Koala Hills High School, and their baseball team's ace.

By the time I stepped outside, a pair of police cars and an ambulance were waiting. Sekura was loaded onto a stretcher, conscious but utterly unresponsive. I spoke briefly with the officers before they shooed me away to begin the cleanup.

"Good work. With this, the client's request has been seen through. Or half of it, at least."

Ms. Mato and I stood under the melting heat of the summer sun, chugging Evian.

We were standing on the roof of the neighbouring hardware centre's parking lot, overlooking the karaoke building from above.

Despite the numbness in my mind from the pain and the sheer absurdity of what I'd witnessed, I'd managed to clean up my own mess and call her once I was sure the target was breathing. She'd told me a patrol officer would arrive in thirty minutes and to wait on the rooftop until then. Another half hour after that, she arrived herself. Now, she leaned against the hood of her Mercedes while I sat perched on a nearby post. Between us, the pitch-black prosthetic sat silently on the concrete.

"How's Sekura doing? All I did was check if he was still breathing. Honestly, I couldn't tell if he even had a pulse back there."

"Don't worry, he's safe. His arm looks like it was fed through an industrial press, but it could have been a lot worse. In exchange for his arm, he regained an ordinary human body. Right now, he's a perfectly healthy patient in critical condition."

"Uh, okay. I only caught a glimpse, but… I saw his left arm stretching earlier."

"I see. For the record, the cleanup crew found no such traces. Like I said, you did it. The lesion was extracted, and he even made it out alive. Now the only question is whether he can go on living as Sekura Yumiya."

"I guess."

The excision of a mutation was extraordinarily rare within the Origa system.

It required a custom procedure for every individual, and even if a universal formula *were* to be discovered, modern society simply lacked the technology and finesse to implement it on a wide scale.

Late-stage patients usually died the moment their lesions were removed. Ironically, the greatest salvation for most was to surrender the hope of a cure and simply spend their remaining days in the hospital. There had been attempts to treat earlier-stage cases—the B-Rank patients—but the survivors always emerged unresponsive, severed from the outside world. In other words, they all became cripples.

Most suffered total brain death; though there were a handful of exceptions, such as a girl who closed herself off, unable to bear the guilt of her actions despite regaining her sanity. If I had any choice in the matter, I would prefer to never revisit those memories again.

"Don't hold yourself accountable, Shozai. He didn't come out unscathed, but a messy cure is infinitely better than being sent to Origa. You never know, he might end up bouncing back."

"Oh, I'm not losing sleep over him. I'm gonna forget about it soon enough anyway."

As it turned out, I wasn't compassionate enough to feel remorse over turning Sekura Yumiya, the Possessed behind the killings, into a cripple. Besides, more pressing matters were at hand.

"Did you know, Ms. Mato?"

I shifted my gaze to the prosthetic on the floor. This mysterious arm had been responsible for curing his Agonist Disorder, literally removing the devil from the Possessed.

"Yeah. I figured out long ago that the kid was anything but human. I've seen that prosthetic twist itself into some ungodly creature more than once. It gobbled the entire thing up, didn't it?"

"That it did. So that's what you were getting at back at the Malion, huh?"

What a complete idiot I'd been. I couldn't believe I'd worked myself into a state over the prospect of unknown technology.

I'd known about the rumours of a devil living in the forest on the outskirts of town, one capable of killing the Possessed—but this was the first I'd heard of it consuming them. From here on out, I wouldn't be able to brush Kaie off as just an eccentric, well-meaning employer.

I had roughly five hours before my memories reset. I could choose to ignore everything and wake up tomorrow none the wiser, but—

"By the way, Shozai. Did you run into anyone else in there? Doesn't it strike you as odd? How could someone with a functioning mutation manage to keep himself in check for so long?"

"You think someone was helpin' him out?"

"No. I'm certain of it. Even if his condition fell on the milder end of the spectrum, he'd never be able to go into hiding for this long on his own. Well, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. Consider this your reward for doing a good job. I'll let you off just this once."

"Wha—?!"

Had the angelic Ms. Mato finally descended upon this world? Or had the summer heat driven her to rinse that icy personality off in a sacred spring somewhere?

"Juvenile crimes aren't part of my job description. Babysitting you has been stressful enough already."

"Boy, am I glad to hear that. You wouldn't be Ms. Mato if you started being kind to people for no reason. Man, you genuinely had me scared for a second here!"

"You need to learn when to keep your mouth shut. I'm asking you about the severity of Sekura Yumiya's Agonist Disorder. If he managed to hold onto his sanity even after the mutation took hold, he likely had a specialist keeping tabs on him."

"Oh, that's what you meant. Good point. People usually go off the deep end after a week or two without a doctor. Right… I just remembered something. I don't really have any basis for this, but wanna hear a hunch anyway, Dr. Touma?"

"Very well. You have permission to speak. Your opinions are absolutely worthless, but I've noticed your instincts have a habit of landing somewhere useful."

"Tch. Sorry for runnin' on my gut. Anyway, that intuition of mine's telling me that Sekura's a little different from the rest of the patients at Origa. You remember how paranoid everyone there was? Like, they were absolutely convinced they were bein' constantly hunted? If anything, I felt like Sekura was the opposite. It was more like he'd grown into himself… like he'd become the predator."

Ms. Mato sank into thought. Despite my lack of formal insight, the fact that I'd survived a year and a half at Origa Memorial Hospital was enough for her to take my words seriously.

"Let's put it this way," she said, her voice shifting into the clinical tone I associated with her lab coat. "For lack of a better term, would you say he didn't seem particularly ill?"

She was clearly putting a fair amount of weight on my read of his condition's severity.

"Not really, no. He was far too coherent. If that level of clarity is all it takes to trigger a mutation, we'd be tripping over the Possessed every time we turned a corner. Wait, unless… the number of Agonist Disorder cases is actually growing?"

"You needn't concern yourself with that. We already have a definitive count of the pathogen that gives rise to the disorder. What you're suggesting is impossible. Agonist Disorder is capable of doing close to anything, but this is one irreversible fact."

"Hang on, you guys actually *have* a number? You know exactly how many cases there are?"

Then why not detain them preemptively? I, for one, would have been eternally grateful if you'd locked up my sister beforehand. They should've just bound her in wire before she had the chance to ruin everyone's lives!

"Unfortunately, a number is all we have. We have no way of knowing how an individual case will manifest until the symptoms surface. As for the pathogen itself, it was eliminated in 1990. Roughly twenty thousand people were exposed, but only a fraction will ever develop symptoms. We've worked out the statistical ceiling: five thousand people, max. The real number might come in under that, but it'll never exceed it."

A maximum of five thousand.

For reference, there were about four thousand discovered cases to date. Among those, three thousand were confirmed dead, and a further six hundred or so were currently housed within Origa. Accounting for the deceased and those admitted off the books, we were creeping fairly close to that upper limit.

"Possession is a disease, though, right? How can you be sure the first generation won't pass it on, or that the pathogen won't just start reproducing on its own?"

"Like I said, that's impossible. At least where Agonist Disorder is concerned. When measuring the strength of a pathogen, we account for three main factors. First: resistance—how long it can survive before the human body absorbs it. Second: infectiousness—the speed at which it induces illness after entry. And finally: reproductivity—the ability of a single pathogen to multiply and spread the infection. Our research at Origa led to a major discovery. Agonist Disorder, or rather, the pathogen behind it, has a crippling lack of reproductivity. While it easily outclasses every other known disease in the first two categories, its ability to propagate barely scrapes a CDC C-Rank."

If the Possessed couldn't reproduce, any rise in cases meant there was a carrier unaccounted for by the official statistics. That was why she had asked about a specialist.

But something still felt off. The way Ms. Mato framed it, Agonist Disorder didn't sound like something that had come into this world naturally.

"I guess that's good news, then. Even if finding the Possessed is a pain, containment is feasible. By the way, do you have stats on a prefectural level too?"

"C Prefecture has the highest concentration. That's why the borders ended up the way they did after 1990. Everyone knows the disorder isn't contagious, but the pathogen's reproductive deficiency isn't public knowledge. There were other factors, surely, but that was reason enough to enforce the quarantine. Honestly, it might be the only time the disorder has ever worked in this country's favour."

In the end, travel between prefectures had been throttled down to two options: limited expressways and Japan Railways. Rumour had it no Possessed had ever crossed the border unaided. Hard as it was to believe, there was even speculation of a minefield. Seriously, what had this world come to?

▪

Now, there are countless things in the world that ought to be kept in the dark.

For instance: the contents of Tsuranui's smooth brain, how Sinker truly became a Possessed, or the secret behind Ms. Mato's frankly inhumane strength, both on the physical and mental front.

Karyou Kaie's true identity was another one of those things. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it sat at the very top of the list. In mystery novels, there's always that hapless bystander who stumbles upon the culprit's identity and winds up dead despite never being a target. Because of the sheer irregularity of that unplanned murder, the detective falters, wavers, and sometimes even slips through dimensions. The victim was unlucky enough to get killed, and yet they still manage to cause problems for everyone from beyond the grave.

Which is why I decided to ignore all this.

Without writing down a single note, I'd simply report what happened that afternoon to my employer and close the book on it.

At least, that was the plan.

Instead, I headed straight for the underground room and hurled the black prosthetic at Kaie, who was grinning at me from the bed. I hit him with the nastiest stare I could muster.

"Explain. I nearly killed him."

"You really *are* kind, Arika. You should have just left him to die."

The dark shadow shook his head in disappointment. His treatment had been a cure in name only—a mercy killing in disguise. Kaie had no intention of saving the target. He was utterly incapable of such thoughts. I should've known better, considering how utterly unbothered he'd been about the whole affair from the start.

"No need to be so mad, Arika. Ask whatever you'd like. I'll answer."

Don't give in to the devil's temptation, Ishizue Arika! Asking who he was, or what that prosthetic really was, were both strictly off-limits. Those were the kinds of secrets you paid for with your life, and I wanted to push my eventual demise as far into the future as possible.

Thus, I had to find a way to quell my rage with a question that sat safely on the borderline.

"Just one thing. Did you send me there expecting me to kill him? Do you think he deserved to die simply because he's a Possessed?"

"Hm, good question," he said, sinking into thought. "I wouldn't say I had any particular attachment to him, but I wouldn't say I wanted him dead, either. I mean… do you have any strong feelings toward the food you eat?"

He looked at me with an expression of pure innocence, like a maiden whose soul was yet unsullied.

"Let me put it this way. It's not about wanting them dead. I simply can't allow their existence. Simple as that. Those things are fakes—mere imitations. If they're allowed to roam free, the price of that act will fall upon the genuine, won't it?"

He felt no sentiment toward the victims. What he relished was the spectacle of their collapse, the way one might savour a story. Anyone who fell prey to that

prosthetic would be thoroughly rolled across his palate, lingering for a moment before melting away like a piece of candy.

"If you say so. Honestly, I'd pegged you for the type who preached charity and goodwill."

He stared at me, genuinely baffled.

"Enough with the strange misunderstandings, Arika. If that's what you think, then you're sorely mistaken. In my entire life, I have never once done anything for the sake of humanity. Not a single time."

The problem was that, despite everything, he still loved humans. But love takes countless forms in this world, and his love for humanity didn't mean he actually cared for them. It just meant that watching them brought him a pleasure like no other.

He was a monster who took the sorrow of man and used it as a seed for his own delight.

There was no need to question it anymore. Without a shadow of a doubt, this brat was a true devil.

Still, I hadn't let myself be deceived. That single glance I'd stolen on that moonlit night had been enough to show me exactly what kind of monster he was.

"Alright, that's good enough for me. I'm heading home now. Can you let me off for ditching work just this once, boss?"

This time, he sat up straight, looking at me in pure disbelief.

"You aren't quitting?"

"Why would I? I'm not landing a job like this anywhere else. Genuinely, though—my mind can't handle being in this place a second longer. I'll be fine by tomorrow, so can I just go?"

"Sure. Do you wanna take the arm with you?"

"Not tonight. Once I forget, I might end up putting it on again."

I made my way out of the room without looking back.

Unfortunately, I couldn't bring myself to swear I'd never wear that prosthetic again. Even though I knew it would eventually come back to bite me, I had to admit the truth. That arm of his felt really goddamn good.

▪

Making sure to log everything that happened today, I waited for the sun to dip below the horizon with a strange fog in my chest.

Why'd I have to go and ask such an unnecessary question? After hearing his answer, the anger I'd been running on had curdled into a hollow dissatisfaction.

Attempting to put it into words would only irritate me further, so I decided to kill time at the movies.

National chains, like the one in the department store by Shikura Station, charged for every individual screening. So instead, I headed to an old-school cinema in Yasakadai, where a single entrance fee let you stay until closing.

Eight hours later, at 10:00 PM, I stepped out into the night and decided to head back to Shikura on foot instead of using the train. It was only a four-kilometre walk, and a bit of exercise never hurt.

On the way, I swung by a fast-food joint for some late-night takeout. Since letting the fries go cold would be a waste, I worked through them as I made my way through town.

The stretch along the railway was relatively safe despite the lousy lighting; it was practically deserted this late, but the trains passing every five minutes provided enough light to deter any criminals.

Halfway home, the familiar *crack* of a bat echoed through the air. I took a detour, following the sound until I stumbled upon a cluster of about twenty teenagers. It was one of those unofficial SvS matches Kirisu had mentioned.

I found myself at a construction site tucked behind the downtown area, shielded from the street's line of sight.

A ten-storey block stood behind the pitcher, serving as an improvised backstop. No matter how hard someone swung, the ball wasn't going to break any windows. About six of them were actually playing, while the rest watched from the sidelines. I was mildly curious, but not enough to wedge myself into the crowd.

I settled for a concrete block off to the side, posting up with my food.

That's when I noticed another figure nearby, also watching from a distance. There I was, chewing on my already lukewarm fries, watching the show unfold, when—

"Holy shit, this batter's absolute garbage! Christ, that pitch's crawling slower than a snail! Just swing already!"

Suddenly, my eyes met with the sicko who was passionately commentating on the game.

"...Ugh."

Put simply, he looked utterly deranged.

For starters, he was wearing a heavy black coat in this sweltering heat, with nothing but bare skin visible beneath the open collar. On top of that, he'd paired it with a pair of black leather pants. Honestly, I wouldn't have batted an eye if he'd just stripped naked in this weather. And finally, there was the bleached hair cascading down his back. Just looking at him was enough to raise my body temperature by two degrees.

Yet despite his bizarre get-up, his appearance was absolutely capable of matching up to it. He had sharp, well-defined features—the kind you don't usually see in Japan—which made him oddly striking. He wore mirrored sunglasses that made me wonder how the hell he could see anything at night. And to top it all off, a nasty scar ran across his hand, looking like he'd been run through with a blade.

Maybe he was on his way home from a concert? Or perhaps he was a model for some visual kei magazine? For whatever reason, he was squatting on the ground and rambling uncontrollably, putting all that misplaced beauty to shame.

And in a shocking turn of events, as I found myself unable to stop staring, our eyes suddenly met.

"....."

"....."

Still squatting, he casually started closing the distance, shuffling toward me without breaking his posture. What the fuck?! Was he a crab?! Behind him, the game continued without a hitch. The pitcher had just struck out his third batter.

"The hell? That was a strike?"

It was too late to back out now.

"Yup. Would've been out if it went any further, though."

"Ain't no way that wasn't out. That shit woulda been a roller even if he'd made contact. I'm tellin' ya."

"That's not how this game works. Besides, by the book, all of those were balls."

"Wait, for real?"

"The umpire's drawing the strike zone pretty wide tonight."

The bottom of a strike zone typically hovered just above the batter's kneecaps, with the ceiling sitting at the midpoint between the shoulders and the belt. Its width, naturally, mirrored the home plate.

But from what I could see, this umpire was calling anything that so much as grazed the edge of the plate a strike. Even in official tournaments, calls varied by the official—so at a certain point, the blame fell on the batter for failing to read their tendencies.

"Check that out. Next batter's got nasty form. That gonna make the strike zone any smaller?"

"Nah. It's supposed to scale to the batter's build. Coiling up like that's only going to work against him."

"Damn, real life ain't nothing like manga. Means there's no point going all hunchback mode, hm? Whaddya make of this batter, then?"

"Just your average dumbass. He's practically begging for a strikeout. Also, could you please mind your own business?"

I waved my hand in an attempt to shoo him away. Unfortunately, that small exchange only fanned the flames of his interest. His grin widened until it was shaped like a crescent moon.

"Gotta say, you're a pretty funny fella! You from 'round here, kid? Nice, by yourself? You in college? Ah, you ain't been goin'? Hell yeah, even better! That hair o' yours dyed? Shit, no way! You born with it?! What's the story 'hind the arm? You got some nice muscles yerself. You an athlete? C'mon, stop ignoring me already. I'm dying of boredom out here, bruddah. Who knows? This might be the beginning of somethin' good."

Why the hell does this keep happening to me?

"Dang, bro. You cool as a cucumber. Got a name, kiddo? Hold on, you older 'n me?"

"Are you blind? Obviously not. Also, I'd rather not hand out my personal info to random weirdos."

"Aw, crap. Forgot I hafta introduce myself 'fore askin' for someone's name. Been forever since I spoke ta someone who ain't gone psycho on me. The name's Hinomori Shuusei. We good now?"

"Hinomori?"

Somehow, I felt like I'd heard his name before.

But now that he'd followed the proper etiquette, I had to reciprocate.

"Arika, written with the kanji for whereabouts? That's sick! Some hipster-ass name ya got there! Hold up. Wait, that makes no sense. Wouldn't that mean... nah, no point thinking about all that. I'm too stupid for this shit. Whatever! None of my business anyway!"

"Uh huh..."

He was a real handful, but I'd never heard my name described quite like that. He had quite the old-fashioned name himself, so maybe stumbling onto something a little more modern had set him off.

"Say, kid. You seem like ya know yer way 'round the diamond. Heard there were two prodigies around here two years back. That those two had the ability to 'kill' on the field or something."

"Yeah. A pitcher and a batter. What about them?"

"Piqued my interest, is all. Killin' someone through baseball ain't exactly your run-o'-the-mill expression. I mean, howddya even do that? The pitcher a deadball specialist or somethin'? Whaddabout the batter? He specialise in comebackers?"

"In that case, they'd be known as genius foulers instead. Though for what it's worth, I've never faced either of them myself. Word was the pitcher threw like he intended to commit murder. As for the batter, pitchers dreaded him—they were convinced they'd be done for if they served up anything sloppy."

Two years ago, that pair was the target of envy for every high school player in Shikura.

One of them was Shikura High's fourth batter.

He'd always been feared, but eventually, pitchers started swearing they'd never step on the mound against him again. I never quite got it, but the rumour was that the moment his bat connected, it felt like having something irreplaceable ripped out of you.

"Both of them are long gone now, though. And who's to say how much of that was even true. Baseball's not that kinda game any—wait, what the hell are you doing?!"

"Hm? Eating, duh."

This son of a bitch was going to town on *my* teriyaki burger! I had no idea when he'd swiped the bag, but he was currently chomping down on my dinner with a look of profound dissatisfaction.

"That's mine, asshole! Is this supposed to be some new form of begging?!"

"Relax, will ya? You left it sitting out fer ages; figured you were done. 'Sides, ya oughta be more careful, Arika. This crap's gon mess with yer game. Keep the junk food in check, 'kay?"

"My diet is none of your business. I've already made my peace with living off takeout for the rest of my life."

"Hm? Those're two different beasts, kiddo. Not all takeout's junk, y'know? Well, whatever. Here."

This absolute clown had just tried to hand me a half-eaten burger.

"Hell no. *You* finish it."

"Aw, c'mon. Sure ya don't wanna go halfsies?"

"Absolutely not. I hate splitting things into two. You can have the rest, so please just leave me alone already."

"That your policy? Or is it your creed? Wait, that's the same thing. Hang on, lemme work this out. You've got some trauma, don'tcha?"

He proceeded to inhale the rest of the burger in two bites.

Despite his lean frame, a closer look revealed a build closer to that of a seasoned martial artist.

His hands were large, possessing a rocky quality seemingly forged by a lifetime of training. His fingers, swollen and scarred from countless bouts of combat, carried the signature of a veteran kendo practitioner.

Even his appetite was predatory, allowing him to wolf down a burger in mere seconds. Every time he opened his mouth, I caught a glimpse of sharp teeth lined up like a shark's fangs. Hold on… was it just my imagination, or had I just described something that wasn't remotely human?

"C'mon, loosen up. Love and peace, that's all I want. Don'tcha feel it? You 'n I would make a killer pair. So throw me a bone here, bruddah. Gimme some more food."

"……"

Never mind. Why did I even bother? This person was nothing more than an utter fool. An absolute buffoon.

"It's getting late. I should be home by now. You can have whatever's left in the bag if you promise not to follow me."

"Aww, don't be such a wet blanket. I ain't gonna hold you up, though. My bad 'bout all this. Haven't been back here in ages. All my old pals have scattered, so I don't really have anyone to fall back on. Feel like a ghost in my own hometown after ten whole years away."

Apparently, Hinomori was a local.

Ten years back meant he'd left around 1995. If he'd left Shikura at twenty, that'd put him pushing thirty right about now.

"Been wandering 'round town lookin' fer a fella. Oh, maybe ya know 'im. What was his name… Gichiri Gichiri? Nah, that ain't right. Uhhh, Gatsuri Gatsuri? I remember it soundin' like some sorta manga sound effect. Wait, maybe it was Tsukiri Tsukiri. Anyway, I figured you might be the guy, but guess not. Ishizue Arika ain't even close."

After all this time, he finally stood up. I looked up in awe as it hit me just how tall he actually was. He didn't have Kirisu's bulk, but his leanness gave him the air of a phantom melting into the night air.

"'Til next time, then—if fate sees fit. Watch yerself at night, kid. This city's crawlin' with all kinds of unsavoury murderers."

He threw a lazy wave as he walked off. From his silhouette alone, you could've easily mistaken him for a superhero—if not for the greasy paper bag of fast food swinging from his hand.

◆

I decided to crash at my apartment instead of heading back to the Ishizue family home. It was now midnight, courtesy of the longer-than-expected detour I'd ended up taking.

After scrubbing the sweat off in the shower, I crashed onto the bed like a corpse.

Today had been a long day. Even though my room was as stifling as a steam bath, it did nothing to slow my descent into a deep, heavy slumber.

I shut my eyes and tried to power down my brain, but the voice of the man I'd run into earlier kept looping in my head. His mere existence was enough to stir up trouble, but his words were what really stung. If only we'd crossed paths in the daylight instead.

"A genius pitcher who made batters fear for their lives, huh?"

While it all started with me being roped into the team, I'd spent most of my high school days practicing on that field.

Those dazzling, nostalgic days of my youth... whether they actually meant anything to me was a question I couldn't answer. I'd always avoided thinking about it. Back then, my creed dictated that I never get too invested in anything that happened during the day.

Maybe that was just how deep my love for the team sport actually ran. Wasn't that the reason behind everything I did today? Both watching that SvS match and handling the job in my notepad were just ways for me to reach out and touch the world of baseball once more.

"Lots to chew on. Well, it is me we're talking about. I probably just did it all on a whim."

Interrupting my one-way journey toward sleep, I reached for today's notes.

There were scattered jottings about the serial killer known as Sinker. *John Doe, aka Sekura Yumiya. Left-handed sidearm. Ability to extend the arm. Behaviour as Sinker.*

Then there was a three-page entry about Kaie, abruptly scratched out halfway through, leaving only a brief message intact: Cheeky asshole. Goddamn devil. Watch out for his temptations or he'll suck your bones dry. Wish I could do something about him.

"What the hell is wrong with me? Why can't I just write like a normal person?"

That last sentence in particular made so little sense that it made me want to do something about *myself.*

More importantly, the pitcher responsible for plunging SvS into chaos was now in Ms. Mato's custody. In other words, he'd been successfully taken off the streets. There was a note saying Kirisu had sheltered Sekura earlier. Maybe I'd press him about it another time.

But just like that, the blood-soaked Sinker had slipped off the SvS stage without ceremony.

"...Hm?"

I couldn't help but furrow my brow at a glaring contradiction in my own notes.

"Hold on. How'd his nickname end up as Sinker? That doesn't make any sense."

(8/14)

11:27 AM, the following day.

I was sitting languidly on the black sofa in the Shikura City Police Station's waiting room.

After a rowdy awakening courtesy of Ms. Mato, I'd spent the last two hours enduring a tedious interrogation.

There was only a single incident they wanted to know about: the latest in the recent string of murders, which had occurred between midnight and 2:00 AM. Sinker, who was believed to have been arrested, had claimed a sixth victim.

"How many times am I gonna have to repeat myself? I didn't even know anything happened. This is discrimination, damn it."

Sekura Yumiya had plenty of sins to answer for, but his case seemed to be entirely separate from Sinker's. In other words, all the effort I'd put in yesterday had been for nothing. Based on the bloodstains at the scene, the police suspected the killer suffered from Agonist Disorder—which is why they'd hauled in Ishizue Arika, fresh out of Origa, for questioning.

"What a waste of time. Is this gonna happen every time someone with Agonist Disorder does something stupid?"

"Sup, Arika. You guys done there? Helluva way to kick off the day, huh?"

A familiar face dropped into the seat beside me.

Kirisu Yaichirou had been called in for reasons unrelated to mine, questioned as one of the organisers behind SvS.

Even though we had now been freed from the grasp of the police, we both sank into the sofa in a bid to get something out of the whole morning ordeal. We were going to bleed their air conditioning dry as compensation for ruining our peaceful sleep.

"Did you hear? Latest victim was Gondou."

"No shit? As in Gondou from Koutokuin?"

"The very same. Supposed to be a shoo-in for the pros, but he'll have to retire now. Took a ball straight to the elbow. Poor bastard. Losing an elbow's a one-way ticket to hell."

It finally lined up. So that was why he'd made it out alive. Gondou's life lost all meaning the moment he could no longer swing a bat. No matter what form its destruction took, Sinker's pitch would never allow its target to emerge intact.

"You heard about his pitch? They say it breaks twice."

"Seems so. No human could throw something like that," Kirisu mumbled, his usual carefreeness replaced by a hushed, heavy tone.

"Agreed. Wait—you've *seen* it?"

"There's footage. You know those anti-theft cams they've got all over downtown Yasakadai? One of 'em picked it up. The quality ain't all that, so I only caught a quick glimpse of it. But still, it's pure horror."

And by pure horror, he meant for the players who had to go up against it. After seeing a ball that broke twice and practically bent at a right angle, no ballplayer would ever sleep soundly again.

"By the way… you knew Sekura wasn't the culprit, didn't you?"

"Mhm. Sekura's a lefty. A screwball pitcher wouldn't end up with the name Sinker."

"Exactly. You got any idea who the real one is?"

"Why're you asking? You gone and gotten yourself tangled up in something dangerous?"

"It's just work. Things… happened yesterday. The request came from Sekura Yumiya's parents. They wanted someone to cure his illness before the police caught wind of it. Unfortunately, the specialist they asked for can't leave his room, so I took care of it in his stead."

"Hold up. They found a cure for Possession?!"

The next instant, Kirisu grabbed my shoulders, his eyes bloodshot.

I'd screwed up. I'd been far too careless—the damned A/C must have softened my brain. Modern civilisation was truly a terrifying thing. Such comfort, available with

the touch of a button. Still, my notes hadn't flagged that stuff as top-secret, so I could only hope Kaie wouldn't blow a gasket over it.

"Uh, I don't really get it myself. I wasn't even the one who cured him, anyway. Just chill out, Kirisu."

"Hell no. You just said you got rid of his Possession. Answer me! What the fuck did you do to him?!"

"Um, I... don't really know?"

His grip showed no signs of loosening.

This was bad. Since I'd already lost my memories, I had no way of giving him anything close to a satisfying answer.

"Which leaves me with only one option. Kirisu... are you absolutely sure you wanna know?"

"Of course I am, dumbass," he responded with the manliness of a true city boy.

There was no turning back now.

While I didn't particularly mind dragging my friend into the road of evildoing myself, I figured I'd leave the honours to someone who actually knew what was going on.

◆

On that day, the underground room was tinged in an ashen grey.

The summer sun had morphed into the leaden hue of winter after filtering through the tainted waters of the reservoir.

The moment he stepped inside, Kirisu lost consciousness for a brief moment. He didn't faint, exactly—it was simply that his mind hit a dead end, paralysed by the sight before him.

Depending on who you were, the figure on the bed was either an intoxicating beauty or a chilling hideousness. For Kirisu, his first impression happened to be the latter.

I'd already briefed Kaie on the situation.

I half-expected him to refuse, but he'd given his permission immediately.

"My, my. You're bringing someone to talk to me? You do come in handy now and then, Arika."

He seemed altogether too pleased with my exploits. By someone to talk to, he probably meant a new target to prey on, but that was beside the point.

The introductions were brief.

Kaie offered a proper greeting, while Kirisu couldn't even manage to say his own name.

To be more precise, he didn't say anything because he couldn't even open his mouth. Having been there myself, I stepped in to act as his spokesman.

Kirisu was frozen, anchored in place by pure, instinctual fear. Because of that, we weren't making a single inch of progress. The shadow on the bed eventually broke the deadlock, smoothing over Kirisu's frayed nerves with that ever-velvety tone.

"I see. So you've got a Possessed you'd like me to dispose of, is that it?"

Yet somehow, the words that came out of his mouth were crueller than any silence.

"...Agh."

Kirisu began to defrost, shocked back into a human state by the sheer callousness of the statement.

"That's not it. I heard... you could cure Possession. That's why I came."

"The reason you trekked all the way into this forsaken forest, yes? How considerate of you. Still, I ought to make things clear. I'm afraid you're labouring under a rather fundamental misconception about what it is I do."

Kaie shifted his gaze to me, his eyes full of silent condemnation.

"You didn't write everything down properly yesterday, did you, Arika?"

Ah, so that was it. Kirisu's misconception had something to do with my lack of communication with myself.

"But you came to talk about Possession, didn't you? I'll ask one more time, then. Someone you know has been possessed by a devil, haven't they?"

"I can't say for sure. I don't know if he's actually sick yet. But I do know that what society calls Possession is a far cry from the real thing."

Kirisu had helped shelter Sekura Yumiya, so he'd already seen that grotesquely swollen left arm of his.

"I see. You've come across someone who actually changed, I gather? How far gone were they? Did they still appear human to you?"

"I've never heard of a Possessed who doesn't look human, nor do I wanna know what that'd look like. Sekura's the only one I've seen up close. His arm swelled up like he'd been poisoned or some shit."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But in exchange, he became a pitcher capable of murder."

"Right. Sekura was good, but he wasn't on that level. Then, out of nowhere, he turned into someone who could end lives with a fastball. Can Possession really change a person that much?"

"It can indeed. Possession grants its host a function beyond their potential—one that reflects their deepest desires. Think of it as a metamorphosis, a complete rebirth of one's capabilities. Of course, the devil's blessing comes at a cost. In the end, what awaits them is nothing less than the irreversible collapse of the self."

"....."

Kirisu's face contorted in pain.

Despite being handed an answer that made his skin crawl, he forced out the one question he dreaded most.

"Then... say, hypothetically, there was a pitcher who'd busted his arm so badly he couldn't even grip a ball anymore. Would he be able to return to peak condition?"

"Of course. In fact, Possession would be his only shot."

But even if that person regained the strength of their golden age, they would no longer be the same being. Only serious cases of Agonist Disorder were referred to as Possessed. To regain their prowess, they would have to pawn off their original form and their very mind.

"Hey. I'll ask you one more time. Is there a way to cure Possession?"

"There is. That is, if you define curing it as simply returning the human body to a normal state. Restoring their ability to function as a human being, however, falls

well outside my domain. Healing the mind is a task for a more proper human. But then again—"

No human in this world had yet proven themselves capable of such a miracle.

"You really are a treat to listen to, mister. A miracle cure, huh? I'm impressed you'd even entertain such a fairy tale."

The exquisite dark silhouette giggled, his voice mocking Kirisu's palpable torment.

"...!"

Kirisu ground his teeth and turned away. He stalked out of the room in silence, his every step radiating regret for having come here at all. Kaie simply watched his retreating figure until the sun shifted, granting the room its former brilliance once more.

"Can you believe it, Arika? He's already killed dozens of people with that bat of his."

He really couldn't resist twisting the knife further.

"Come on, Kaie. I get why you're annoyed—he didn't even bother to greet you. I mean, I don't exactly approve of his manners either, but that's no reason to call him a murderer. Seriously, what the hell is wrong with this city? Sinker, my sister, and whoever else is lurking out there... it's practically a paradise for murderers!"

"Don't worry, that was just a play on words. Sinker and Kirisu are complete opposites. Kirisu is possessed by something more... human. He's in a completely different league than a serial killer possessed by a fake. Ah, but the person he mentioned—that was likely the real Sinker, wasn't it? Say, do you know who Sinker is?"

"I've got an idea, at least. That's half the reason I brought Kirisu here in the first place. I figured if he recognised the killer, it had to be someone I knew, too. And sure enough, hearing his question jolted my memory. If we're counting retirees, there's only one guy who could commit murder with a pitch."

There wasn't even any need for Possession.

Two years ago, Koala Hills's roster had featured a certain second-year—a genius pitcher who was subbed out during the District Finals and eventually faded into obscurity.

"Iguruma Kazumi. While several coaches mourned the loss of his talent, almost every player was secretly relieved to see him go."

"Oh, I've heard that name. One of Shikura's two prodigies, right? Koala Hills's Iguruma, and Shikura's... uh, what was the other one's name? Do you know, Arika?"

"What are you talking about? He was just here."

"...Huh?"

"That shady hoodlum that was just here. With a batting average of 0.45, the generational slugger of Shikura High, Kirisu Yaichirou."

2. S.VS.S-2

▪▪▪

Position. Windup.
Stride. Swing. Contact.

In that instant, my entire body condensed into a single screw. No matter what the pitch may be, it stood no chance against the swing of my bat. A single fluid motion of the shoulders and hips, optimised for human perfection. My swing, whittled down to spare the body every last ounce of strain, attains peak acceleration in the space of a breath.

Hurtling toward me at a breakneck speed of forty metres per second, the seven-centimetre ball comes into contact with the tip of my bat. Hundreds of days spent toiling away, incinerated within a mere second in the batting box. Honed for the singular act of swinging a bat, my body cries out in ecstasy upon proving its worth.

I stood in the midst of a modern colosseum.
Under the blazing sun, neither blood nor flesh were sacrificed.
Within this world, the only tribute would be our dedication to baseball.
A midsummer paradise engulfed by incessant cheering.

In an attempt to protect it all, I desecrated everything that ever mattered.
A pitch that darted beyond my field of vision.
A shoddy, powerless swing of my bat.
A triple play into the hole that had been frozen in time.

I stood in utter shock at the sensation I'd steeled myself for.

At that instant.
For the first time, I learned the sound of bones shattering.

6 / Slugger. (Bottom)

▪

"He's incredible. If only he could move in here and stay with me."

Kirisu Yaichirou was six years old when his grandfather—once a baseball player in the prewar years—muttered those fateful words.

That was how it all began. Despite being tight on money, his parents scraped together enough to buy him a brand-new bat, gently ruffling his hair as they told him he was free to play the sport if he truly wanted to.

They were easygoing people, with no particular talents to speak of. Still, Kirisu had always been proud of his loving parents.

Just as they would never give him up for any reason, Kirisu refused to throw himself into baseball just because someone else expected him to.

Though his grandfather mourned the boy's squandered potential, Kirisu spent most of his childhood keeping the bat at arm's length. He played casual pickup games with his friends every now and then but never felt the need to practice. Instead, he carried his bat everywhere as if it were a prized relic, though in his young mind, it felt more like an item of adventure than sporting equipment.

It would take another two years for his fateful encounter with baseball. In the autumn of his second-grade year, everything changed when he met a certain boy. For the first time ever, he would begin swinging his bat in earnest every single day. Venturing out to the edge of the Nouzu Industrial Complex in search of a new playground, Kirisu stumbled across a child playing a lonely game of catch against a concrete wall.

A year younger than him, the small boy threw the ball over and over, only stopping once the sun dipped below the horizon.

Yet despite his absolute focus, he seemed completely devoid of passion.

Each throw carried his full power, but there wasn't a single trace of joy in the motion. If anything, it seemed as though he actively resented being there. Nobody had forced him to be there, yet he would always let out a sigh of resignation before setting off home. After watching this same solitary ritual unfold for several days in a row, an impulse suddenly flared up inside Kirisu, compelling him to call out.

"Mind if I jump in? I'll bat. We can make it a real game."

Why had he done such a thing? There must have been a reason behind his actions, but whatever pushed him forward in that exact moment had long since slipped through the cracks of memory. But while he acted entirely on the spur of the moment, the distinct feeling that this was a turning point he couldn't just brush off had undoubtedly flashed through his mind.

"What's your deal?" the younger boy asked, eyeing the upperclassman and his bat with a sideways glance, unable to muster the energy to properly tell him off.

On that day, Kirisu Yaichirou's baseball finally began in earnest.

The boy's name was Iguruma Kazumi—a first-grader from a different school, and one of the many fatherless children growing up in the industrial shadow of Nouzu.

"What's gotten into you, Yaichi? I thought you couldn't stand baseball."

His kindhearted father gently nudged him forward, careful not to pressure his son despite rejoicing in this sudden, newfound passion.

At this point, his grandfather had already given up on taking him in; his mother, on the other hand, harboured silent expectations for his talent. She urged him to join a local Little League team, but Kirisu shot the idea down immediately. There was no fun to be had playing with a bunch of strangers and haughty adults. After all, baseball had become a special game between him and his newfound friend.

"Sorry I'm late, Iguruma. Got a new ball."

They would meet in a desolate, unpopulated stretch of the Nouzu Industrial Complex.

After its abrupt beginning, their makeshift game became a daily fixture within a week. It quickly became obvious that both possessed a raw talent that ran circles

around their peers. Even without a proper understanding of baseball's official rules, their relentless cycle of pitching and batting honed their innate abilities with every passing day, driving them to gradually seek out a greater challenge.

Anyone who stumbled across them would have struggled to believe they were looking at grade-schoolers. Respective skill aside, their ability to utterly lose themselves in the game had gone beyond any child their age. They put everything on the line with every pitch, refusing a single compromise.

"My gramps said you can't play baseball if you don't got a catcher. Said something about the sport having two distinct sides—the batter on one, and the pitcher and catcher working as a pair on the other. He got real bent outta shape when I told him there were only two of us."

They had thrown themselves into it so intensely that their one-on-one dynamic was beginning to grow stale. To elevate their game into something authentic, a catcher was crucial. Deep down, Kirisu balked at the idea, but contrary to his expectations, Kazumi agreed without hesitation.

"Sure. I'll trust anyone you bring along. I've been getting my ass handed to me lately anyway. If I wanna beat you, I need to push myself even harder."

The pitcher sought out a worthy catcher.

Thrilled that his temperamental friend placed that much faith in his judgement, Kirisu took immense care in selecting their third teammate. In the end, one of the neighbourhood friends he used to play casual games with volunteered. The boy had watched Kirisu's games with growing fascination, especially since his own family wouldn't let him join Little League despite how desperately he wanted to play.

"Everyone else went off to the Little League. But I can catch as many balls as I want if I play with you guys. Will you please let me join?"

Their third comrade fell perfectly in the middle of Kirisu and Kazumi—bridging the gap in their skills, their personalities, and even their family dynamics. Somehow, the trio balanced each other flawlessly. This makeshift game consisting of a mere three players—a setup far too paltry to even be called baseball—carried on until Kirisu hit fifth grade.

In a group sport, having even a single outlier is enough to dramatically elevate a team's strength.

Witnessing their skills up close. Being able to practice against them day after day. The team's absolute trust in a single genius allows them to harbour hope toward the future.

There was no greater catalyst for growth than having a concrete benchmark to chase. Free from anxiety or doubt, the rest of the unit were liberated to devote themselves entirely to the collective.

That was what it meant to be pulled forward by the gravity of pure genius.

Each of the three children gathered in that blind spot of the park possessed such gifts. Physical superiorities born from genetic advantages; mental resilience forged by the environments they were raised in; and innocent hearts that allowed them to place unyielding faith in one another's talents.

Somehow, within a closed world entirely isolated from adults, they had managed to construct the bare minimum environment needed to cultivate their genius, working tirelessly to broaden the scope of their skills by piecing together whatever meagre fragments of knowledge they could absorb.

"I heard the hip joint's a huge deal in baseball. If your core is solid, you can throw and swing way harder. You guys know any way to toughen up our hips?"

Kirisu Yaichirou's grandfather had succeeded in an era before professional coaching staffs were standard baseline requirements for a team. As a result, everything the old man passed down was taught by raw instinct rather than textbook theory. Fortunately for the trio, they craved practical advice they could immediately test on the field, rather than convoluted theory that would only leave them confused.

"We need to train the muscles on the inside more than the ones on the outside. It's all about having a rock-solid core. My gramps used to say that a pitcher and a batter are like a single screw—if there's no stable base for it to rotate on, it can't unleash its full power. Um, if you do this, it's supposed to help train your... uh, adductor muscles..."

The lessons handed down from his grandfather were, in essence, a direct roadmap for building a powerhouse athletic core.

Conventional wisdom dictated that players at their age absolutely required a coach to instil proper mechanics, to warn them that bad habits would only become harder to break as they grew older. However, fundamental movements were not something that needed to be manufactured by an instructor; they were simply natural extensions of the human anatomy.

Hurling a ball at a 100 kilometres per hour off a full-body rotation and violent stomp of the foot.

Whipping a bat head through the zone at identical speeds off a seamless uncoiling of the limbs.

Those explosive actions had been etched into human DNA as a matter of survival ever since mankind first took up the hunt. There was nothing mystical about them. Any human was capable of replicating such motions.

Ultimately, the real key to pitching and batting lay in discovering the most natural way to synchronise the arms with the shoulders and hips. It was only after mastering the perfect form tailored for their body that a player would need to tone their physique or optimise their movements even further. In other words, advanced coaching would have served absolutely no purpose to them at this stage.

Their basic stances were forms they had felt out entirely on their own. Even without tapping into the mountain of baseball theory accumulated over decades, their relentless hunger for self-improvement and their sharp, intuitive eyes kept pushing them forward—no coach required.

All they had to work with were the tools they had carved out with their own two hands. Baseball was a world that belonged to the three of them and no one else. There was never any need to learn the strategies required to win as a team.

"I'm gonna have a crack at throwing sidearm. I can't throw pure heat without a stronger frame anyway, so I'm just gonna grind till I can snap off a filthy breaking ball!"

After realising he had reached a ceiling with his overhand delivery, Iguruma Kazumi naturally transitioned to a sidearm slot.

Their baseball was a brutal, relentless pursuit of evolution; the delicate balance would be utterly ruined the moment a single player lagged behind.

Unable to keep up with the explosive growth of his batter, the young pitcher's only option was to throw himself into practice with manic intensity. For he had silently sworn he would always stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the friend who had saved him.

Eventually, he went beyond a mere sidearm, even mastering the mechanics of an underhand. To the very end, Kirisu Yaichirou never realised the truth. Kazumi's fervour was not born from any deep-seated passion toward the wiles of pitching—it was no more than the simple terror of losing his friend.

Where had it all gone wrong?

On that fateful day, Kirisu's eyes had been entirely consumed by the unadulterated joy of crushing a pitch he had never seen before. Tragically, it was that exact euphoria that blinded him to the anxieties tearing his friend apart right in front of him.

◆

Kirisu Yaichirou had no shortage of acquaintances, but the only two people he truly considered friends were his partners in baseball.

In his case, it happened purely by chance. It wasn't that he disliked the company of his classmates; he simply found himself drifting back toward the diamond instead.

Before long, those two playmates were the only ones close enough to earn the title of friend.

Meanwhile, Iguruma Kazumi's solitude was a predetermined outcome.

An isolation entirely born out of malice. Unfortunately for Kazumi, his circumstances were far too entrenched to be mended. Neither he, nor Kirisu, nor anyone else in the world could have done a thing to alter them—simply because the cruelty stemmed not from a single individual, but from the collective architecture of society itself.

Iguruma Kazumi was raised without a father, his parents having divorced before he saw the light of day. Lacking marketable skills, a higher education, or any real foothold in the working world, his mother struggled constantly to keep them afloat. They had been drowning in financial ruin since his infancy, but Kazumi had been so desperate just to survive that he never even had the luxury of questioning their poverty.

The only reason he never held society in contempt for his upbringing was because his mother desperately tried to love and raise him to the absolute best of her ability. Even if she couldn't do the work an average person could, she took whatever filthy, degrading jobs she could find just to keep their heads above water. To protect her son, she burned herself to ashes far faster than anyone around her. Watching her age rapidly—never once catching a glimpse of the beauty life had to offer—Kazumi could never bring himself to envy others.

To him, everyone else was an enemy.

Society would never extend a helping hand to a weakling like him; if anything, it went out of its way to grind down anyone who failed to conform to its rigid metrics. He wasn't merely vulnerable, nor was he simply a child the world had overlooked. Treated as the unsightly, powerless byproduct of a single mother, his peers recognised him instantly as a target. The adults treated him like a malignant tumour, while their children took their cues from home and made him a perpetual laughingstock. Even when he did manage to make friends who accepted him for who he was, those bonds were always cut short the moment their parents caught wind of his background. Within the realm of compulsory education—a system that supposedly guaranteed

equality for all—Kazumi's inability to cover his basic lunch fees and school materials meant he was never treated like a proper student. The school saw no reason to protect the child of a household that didn't abide by the rules of respectable society, and it went without saying that no adult was willing to stand up and protest on his behalf.

His homeroom teacher was a compulsive neat freak who viewed Kazumi as a literal stain on her pristine classroom. Eventually, she gave up on trying to purge the blemish and decided instead to utilise it.

On that day, the class was handed a perfect scapegoat. She provided the children with a convenient outlet for their collective frustrations by forcing one defenceless boy to shoulder the blame for everything.

At the start of each day, they held a classroom trial—a morning routine where students would air grievances about their classmates' behaviour outside of school. Not a single morning session went by without Kazumi being placed squarely in the crosshairs.

"Teacher, I saw Kazumi playing in another part of town again."

Everyone in the room, including the teacher, knew he was actually out helping his mother with work.

"Step forward, Iguruma. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

The moment Kazumi tried to explain, her hand snapped across his cheek.

His classmates treated his suffering as a simple show to spice up an otherwise dull school day, barely stifling their snickers as they watched the spectacle unfold. Ordering him back to his seat, the teacher eyed him as though she had just brushed against something foul.

"Kazumi never learns, does he? You should punish him even more, Teacher."

"There's no point trying to educate a child who refuses to learn. Let him off with this for today, class."

Joyous laughter rippled through the room. The very person whose duty was to eradicate bullying was now openly fanning its flames. Yet, their homeroom teacher possessed an ironclad sense of righteousness; she genuinely believed she was doing what served the collective best. To her, and to the other adults alike, a weakling like

him was no better than a criminal. Every single day spent within those school walls felt, to Iguruma Kazumi, like serving a sentence in a giant prison.

Naturally, at their young age, his two friends had no way of grasping just how much salvation their mere existence provided him.

For Kirisu Yaichirou, that reckoning wouldn't come until the dying days of their makeshift games. On one perfectly uneventful afternoon, he finally began to piece together just how careless he had been, and just how staggeringly poor his friend truly was.

Kirisu would frequently invite Kazumi over for dinner on weekends. He loved having his friend around the family table, and Kazumi was deeply grateful that Kirisu's mother always prepared a generous, hearty feast for them.

Having never been provided a proper school lunch, those weekly dinners with the Kirisu family became a strange cocktail of excitement and guilt for the young boy.

However, that routine eventually birthed a subtle misunderstanding.

Kazumi had come to view the dinners at his friend's house as incredibly monumental occasions. The perception he had developed to survive had taught him to calculate exactly what a parent stood to gain by going out of their way to treat a stranger so well. Thus, Kazumi assumed the meals prepared on weekends were extravagant feasts made specifically to welcome him. As much as he cherished every single bite, he always felt a pang of sorrow for forcing them to go to such trouble on his account.

That guilt was the sole reason he could bear to sit within the shimmering brightness of that happy household.

The fact that it felt so heavy was precisely what gave it meaning.

Then, on a perfectly ordinary weekday, Kirisu casually invited Kazumi over for dinner on a whim. Caught off guard by the unannounced guest, Kirisu's mother made a point to apologise, lamenting that she hadn't had the chance to whip up anything special for them.

A few moments later, staring down at the ordinary array of everyday food on the table, the realisation finally hit Iguruma Kazumi.

What he had once considered a grand feast.

What he had once believed was only served because of his presence.

In the end, it was nothing more than a commonplace sight, granted to every ordinary child as a birthright.

"Ah… so that's it. So this is normal."

He felt neither shock nor sadness. He simply absorbed the reality right in front of him without a word. For the first time in years, his vision began to blur, unable to suppress the sudden, suffocating weight of his own family's meagre existence.

Kirisu caught a fleeting glimpse of his friend's face—frozen solid, blank and hollow as a Noh mask. For the rest of his life, Kirisu would never forget this sight. The sight of a child learning the true meaning of despair after witnessing the warmth of ordinary happiness. From that day forward, though they were far from wealthy, Kirisu swore he would never refer to his own family as poor again.

To do so would be akin to throwing mud in the face of the protagonist he so deeply admired.

While others may have harboured a grander impression of him, Kirisu Yaichirou had always considered himself a mediocre, thoroughly average human being.

He held fast to the conviction that he would never end up as the main character of any story. Born into a run-of-the-mill household with an entirely unremarkable personality, he fully expected to live a life that fit that predictable mould.

He would never be a hero; after all, he lacked the fortitude that such a mantle demanded. Even the athletic physique he had been blessed with wasn't something he considered his own. Kirisu vaguely understood that he lacked the strength a real main character needed to overcome catastrophic adversity.

But to him, Iguruma Kazumi was different. With a willpower that almost defied belief, Kazumi was the living incarnation of the protagonist Kirisu had spent his whole life longing to see.

Eventually, that realisation would become the very thing that caused Kirisu the most pain.

◆

"Sup. Keep ya waiting long, Sinker?"

After Kazumi switched to a sidearm delivery, Kirisu had taken to calling him by that nickname. It was his own quiet way of showing respect and affection toward a friend who had set off down a gruelling road he himself could never hope to walk.

Gradually, their private games drew closer to a perpetual stalemate.

They had shared thousands of matchups between them. By now, a mere glance at the way a foot stepped onto the dirt mound, or a split-second look at how the shoulders settled into the batter's box, was more than enough to read each other's physical condition perfectly. The exact same cycle of outcomes kept repeating—one win, one loss. While Kirisu possessed an inborn advantage, the moment Kazumi secured a dedicated catcher of his own, he began rapidly closing the gap, levelling the scoreboard little by little.

The only thing exempt from this rule was Kazumi's signature pitch.

A vanishing pitch, released as low and as wide as he could push it.

Unleashed from a right arm hovering mere inches above the dirt, the ball would soar upward before violently plummeting directly before the batter's eyes.

It was Kazumi's trademark sinker—a pitch that onlookers would later swear broke at a literal right angle. Whenever he executed it on its optimal trajectory, not even Kirisu's explosive swing stood a chance of making contact.

In the end, their games concluded without a definitive victor. Though Kirisu maintained a slightly higher overall win rate, the two of them were torn apart before he could ever find a definitive counter to Kazumi's sinker.

"Hey, mind if we jump in? You can't really play baseball with only three people."

Inevitably, word began to spread. After three years of isolating themselves in the industrial park, other baseball die-hards had caught wind of their game, eventually joining in.

The tiny circle surrounding Kazumi and Kirisu swelled larger by the week. At the end of the day, the sport was the only thread tying this eclectic group together, but that suited Kazumi just fine. After all, none of them tried to make fun of him. For the first time in his life, he was permitted to be nothing more than an ordinary kid among peers.

"You three. Which team do you play for?"

Eventually, their path crossed with a local Little League coach who had stopped to watch them play. Upon discovering they weren't attached to an official roster, the well-meaning man immediately offered to carve out spots for them on his team.

But baseball, like so many organised sports, was a game that required money. That was the simple reason it rarely flourished in impoverished countries.

Entry fees, monthly dues, equipment costs, and uniform expenses—no child could ever hope to scrape that kind of money together on their own, and asking their parents was entirely out of the question. While Kirisu's family could have managed somehow, for his other two friends, it was no more than a pipe dream.

"Don't you worry about that. I'll sort everything out if you three come on board. Anything else you boys need, just say the word."

Suddenly, a grander dream materialised before their eyes.

The year that followed became one of the happiest chapters of Kirisu's life.

Rather than trying to stand out or utilising his newfound knowledge to climb the ranks, he simply lost himself in the joy of the game. More than anything, he loved the fact that the three of them finally got to play proper baseball.

"Kirisu, you're graduating next year, right? We're gonna end up in different teams when that happens."

A true game of baseball, played in front of a real crowd. Having an audience breathed a distinct vitality into the sport, filling the air with an electric tension during the game's pivotal moments.

Nowhere was this more palpable than the bottom of the ninth, with the potential for a dramatic turnaround hanging in the balance.

Every single gaze in the stadium would converge upon the narrow corridor between the pitcher's mound and the batter's box. Friend and foe alike would chase the trajectory of a single stitched ball, their collective heartbeats synchronising entirely. Kirisu loved that moment more than any other, and so did Kazumi. That was why—

"Don't laugh, okay? I'm gonna become a pitcher that nobody can hit. So you become a batter that nobody can strike out. And then, one day—"

—one day, let's settle our score for real on the biggest stage in the world.

Kazumi scratched his cheek sheepishly as he spoke, framing the words as though he were voicing a childish wish that could never actually come true.

But that exact dream was the very thing Kirisu had been guarding in his heart since the beginning. Even back when it was just the two of them, he had wished with everything he had that the whole world could witness the majesty of Iguruma Kazumi's pitches. Their induction into the Little League was merely the prologue. Whenever Kazumi's genius was recognised, Kirisu lit up as if the praise had been directed at him instead.

That was exactly why concepts like fame or glory never meant much to him. Kirisu Yaichirou simply wanted to ensure that the world would never make the mistake of labelling him a genius ever again.

"I owe you big time, Kirisu. It's all because of you."

Half a year had passed since they joined the Little League when Kazumi suddenly thanked him from the bottom of his heart.

He looked terribly worn down as he bowed his head, his shoulders and elbows ragged from grinding through practice day after day. Yet somehow, something about him felt entirely hollowed-out compared to the boy who used to show up to the park without a care in the world.

"My mum's been smiling a lot lately. Said she's happy everyone keeps talking me up."

His mother undoubtedly blamed herself for the destitute upbringing she had inflicted upon her son.

Now, she simply watched from the sidelines in silence, rejoicing in his exploits.

In that exact moment, Kirisu Yaichirou's greatest rival and closest friend abandoned him—concluding, in the quiet spaces of his mind, that baseball was his sole means of salvation.

The ball was no longer something he threw because it brought him joy. He dedicated everything he had to baseball, seeking within it a means to a better life.

Kirisu simply sent him off with a wry, supportive smile, quietly celebrating the birth of a hero.

But a single thought drifted through his mind, just the once.

Back then, during that uneventful dinner that had scarred Kazumi's heart forever. If he had shown even a fraction more tact that night—if he had been just a little more considerate—could he have stopped his precious friend from driving himself right to the brink?

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Gradually, the three of them began to drift down entirely different roads.

Perhaps the issue lay in Kirisu's view on baseball itself.

He possessed more talent than anyone else, yet he derived no pleasure from victory. For those who lacked such genetic blessings, a disposition like his was nothing short of blinding. It flaunted an insurmountable wall—a reminder that no amount of human effort could ever bridge the gap between mediocrity and genius. And so—

"This is so much fun."

—that was why they gave in to the temptation offered by that dubious stranger with a gentle smile.

He materialised at dusk, seemingly out of thin air.

Even after joining the Little League and gaining an entire roster of new companions, the three boys had stubbornly kept their private ritual alive. Though their free time was dwindling, they still made a point to sneak away to the industrial park, jesting and bickering as they critiqued each other's form. Kirisu was now in sixth grade. Once he graduated, he would no longer have any time to spare.

The end of their paradise was firmly in sight.

No—if they were being honest, it had already ended long ago. Now, they were merely clinging to the fading remnants of its past radiance out of desperation.

It was precisely then that the stranger called out to them, his voice soft and melodious.

"I'm somewhat of a devil, you see. An imitation, if you will. Tell me, how does this sound? You three seem like good boys. I would be delighted to grant each of your deepest desires. However, in return, you must surrender something you hold dear."

The guy evidently had a few screws loose.

Kirisu prepared to turn him away, but his younger comrades simply listened on, failing to sense the danger bleeding into the air.

"Are you into baseball, mister?"

"Oh, most certainly," the man replied, maintaining his unhurried, soft-spoken cadence. "Every single adult from my generation absolutely loves baseball. We didn't exactly have much else going for us in those days, after all."

Unlike Kirisu, Kazumi was entirely unaccustomed to adults approaching him with kindness. As a result, he couldn't help but feel a flush of happiness at being treated as an equal. Perhaps the void of growing up without a father played a small part in it too.

In the end, the boys found themselves unable to resist his temptation.

"All you have to do is give voice to your deepest desire," the devil coaxed, his smile widening.

"I want all of my swings to be a home run!"

"I want a pitch that no batter in the world can hit!"

Kirisu simply stood in silence.

He was old enough to recognise that nothing good ever came from entertaining a bizarre stranger, and he harboured no desire desperate enough to warrant sacrificing something precious.

But his two friends each had their own reasons for giving those guileless wishes a voice.

For one, it was a festering envy toward the overwhelming talent of the prodigy standing right beside him. For the other, it was a paralysing anxiety born from the realisation that he was no longer allowed to lose.

"Two truly marvellous wishes. Now, it is time for me to hold up my end of our little bargain."

Still wearing that same easy smile, the stranger reached out and took their small hands into his own.

Through his large dry palms, he felt each of their beating pulses before slowly releasing his grip on them. While Kirisu breathed a sigh of relief, the other two questioned the man, frustrated at the lack of apparent change.

"Oh, but your wishes have already been seen to. You there. You're going to die the next time a batter manages to hit your ball. As for you, you're going to die the instant you fail to hit a home run."

His mouth warped into the shape of a crescent moon, bursting into a fit of laughter.

Suddenly, the dusken park seemed to freeze over.

Crimson clouds flowed through the sky like viscous blood, conveying the grim reality of the fairy-tale curse that had been cast upon them.

"I told you, didn't I? I am a devil. This is simply the only means by which I can make good on a wish. Think of it as a lesson from an old man. Desire and survival must always be inextricably linked. Separating these two is no more than a compromise—one that will serve to dull any triumph. Now, my boys... prove your worth and survive."

Survival. The simplest, and most necessary, pleasure in the world.

"One bad pitch, and you die. One bad swing, and you die. Marvellous, is it not? That which you value more than anything else has become your entire life. Which means a single loss will strip your existence of its worth entirely."

Leaving those words echoing in the air, the stranger melted into the sunset. Neither of them caught sight of how he vanished; it left behind a hollow sensation, as though he had never truly been there at all. The three children forced a laugh, mocking each other for falling into some crackpot stranger's trap. Each of them was desperate to shove that eerie smile out of their minds as quickly as possible.

From this point, it'd take another day before his curse began to bear its vicious grip on them.

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The following day, their third friend failed to hit a home run in a casual game of baseball. Needless to say, nothing happened to him. By that evening, all three of them had completely shrugged off the bizarre encounter from the night before, returning to the exact same park to run through their usual drills before calling it a day.

"Listen up, everyone. Something terrible has happened."

Another day had passed since then. Their coach's voice was drowned out by the clatter of trains cutting across the riverbed.

Their catcher was nowhere to be seen. He was a boy who loved baseball every bit as passionately as the other two, a boy who had never missed a single day of practice. The night before, he'd passed away within the confines of his own home. His entire family had also met the same fate. The authorities publicly labelled it a robbery-homicide, though the culprit went entirely unidentified. The neighbours reported hearing screams that night, leading some townspeople to chalk it up to a case of domestic violence instead.

"It's because… he broke the promise."

Kazumi had never truly believed the man's words, and even his friend's demise wasn't enough to convince him completely.

But that didn't stop a quiet anxiousness from welling up within him.

A single bad pitch meant death. Even if it was no more than a baseless implication, the truth was that it mirrored Iguruma Kazumi's deepest conviction.

If his entire identity, his very right to exist, was tied to his status as a genius pitcher, then the exact moment his talent faltered would be the end of the line for him regardless. He understood that such thoughts would only lead him to ruin. However, even if he could never convince himself that he had made the right choice, it was far too late to turn back now.

He couldn't afford to betray his mother, as well as everyone else around him. The only reason he'd been accepted as a proper member of society was his gift on the

mound. Without that, he would slide right back into being that same weakling who could do nothing but silently endure the blows.

"This ball is my life. To strike my ball with a bat means—"

Hitting the ball was a fundamental part of baseball, but there was no one to teach such a simple rule to him.

Having been alone from the very beginning, he believed that a pitcher was someone meant to play baseball entirely on his lonesome. As a result, Kazumi only retreated further and further into solitude.

"Kirisu… you want me dead, don't you?"

In that exact moment, the false curse that had been foisted on him was willed into something undeniably real.

The bloodlust he began to display on the mound sprang forth from nothing less than primal self-preservation. Every single pitch became a literal battle with his life on the line.

Transforming his obsession and fear into motivation, he tirelessly worked to hone his right arm.

With breaking balls as the backbone of his repertoire, he was best suited as a relief pitcher.

Once Iguruma Kazumi took the mound, a scoreline that could only be the devil's handiwork would go up on the board—zero hits after the seventh inning.

The price he paid for that was isolation from his peers. No one ever opened up their hearts to the pitcher who threw like he meant to kill, even during practice.

"This is for the best. My baseball was always meant to be like this. Only a talentless fool goes looking for comfort in a crowd. I was alone when it started, and I'll be alone when it ends."

His friend's words could no longer reach him.

The pile of corpses continued to pile up.

In time, Iguruma Kazumi became king of a wasteland entirely of his own making.

Kirisu could do nothing but watch as his friend became a shell of his former self. He cursed his own foolishness; he had been too blind to notice Kazumi's mounting anxieties throughout all those years, too oblivious to see the surreptitious bullying that had been worming its way through their team.

If Kirisu had stopped to think for even a single moment, he would have understood that they were never going to be welcomed into the club with open arms. They were a trio of newbies who had won the coach's favour. Within a brief half year, they had forced their way into the starting lineup, improving at a pace that made it look like they had absolute disregard for the older players.

Unbeknownst to Kirisu, Kazumi had long since been completely on his own.

"Kirisu, do you still remember that stupid promise we made? If you do… then please… just forget about it."

The climax had arrived, everyone holding their breaths in anticipation. It was no longer the same baseball they once played for enjoyment.

Kazumi could only ever unleash the ball with a burning hatred, while Kirisu could never shake off his lingering sentiments whenever he gripped the bat. The innocent game they had played thousands of times in the dust of the industrial park had vanished without a trace.

Looking back on it now, there's no other outcome it could've possibly reached.

Someone who possessed nothing and someone who possessed everything were never going to see eye to eye.

Their paths would only continue to diverge as the years marched on, destined to never cross again.

The baseball that Kirisu loved and the baseball that Kazumi needed were two entirely different things.

That's all there was to it.

Kirisu mourned that fact, cursing the ways of the world but a single time. To him, people like Kazumi were the ones who deserved to be blessed with talent.

Thus, Kirisu Yaichirou's childhood came to a close.

After graduating, he continued to enjoy baseball as his heart saw fit. Meanwhile, the legend of Iguruma Kazumi's sinker only continued to spread, earning him a reputation as C Prefecture's greatest breaking-ball pitcher.

It would take another six long years before the gears of fate finally brought them face-to-face once more. On the final summer of Kirisu's high school days, they would finally settle the score—at least, that was what they believed.

▪

It was during his high school years that Kirisu truly cemented his reputation as the most lethal slugger in the prefecture.

Shikura First High School happened to possess an above-average baseball program, a genius batter who drifted in and out of the lineup on a whim, and a head coach utterly obsessed with victory. It was solely due to this intersection of coincidences that Kirisu found himself devoting his body to the diamond once more.

He spent his first year quietly building up the team's foundations. By his sophomore year, the district championship was well within their crosshairs, with the entire lineup centred completely around their fourth batter, Kirisu Yaichirou. With a star player of his calibre anchoring the helm, the team's collective ceiling skyrocketed.

However, during that same sophomore season, Kirisu suddenly developed a bizarre tic.

For reasons nobody could pin down, he'd throw up whenever he hit a home run. These episodes were far from a mild case of nerves; he would often stand retching over the dirt three times in succession and, on several occasions, completely blacking out in the middle of a match.

He fiercely vetoed every attempt by his teammates and coaching staff to unearth the root cause, until their mounting concern eventually escalated all the way to the principal's desk. Desperate for a solution, the faculty went so far as to entrust his care to an upperclassman—a student for whom Kirisu harboured an inexplicable soft spot. Unfortunately, that intervention didn't pan out the way the school had hoped.

"Is there really any need to fix it? Looks to me like he wants to keep puking. Just let the guy puke."

Those cold words were the only solution the senior provided.

But despite his internal torment, Kirisu's performance showed no signs of decay; his list of exploits only grew more legendary by the week.

Regardless, baseball wasn't simple enough a sport for a single slugger to carry an entire roster on his back. Shikura High suffered a bitter first-round exit in the spring, followed by a fourth-round defeat in the summer.

The following year, 2002.

In the final summer of Kirisu's high school career, he and his teammates found their destined path to the championship barred by their longstanding rivals, Koala Hills. Both powerhouses naturally steamrolled through the second round, making their inevitable clash the undisputed talk of the town. Just as Shikura High had their prodigious slugger, Koala Hills also had a genius of its own. While they had an ace in their third-year pitcher, their second-year relief, Iguruma Kazumi, had also evolved into a player worthy of representing the entire district.

On the eve of the fateful match, Kirisu's phone rang. On the other end of the line was the childhood friend who had spent years keeping him at an absolute arm's length.

"Crush whatever pitch I throw at you. With everything you've got."

That was the very first thing Kazumi said.

Exhaustion bled through his voice, barely resembling the one Kirisu remembered.

"Baseball's nothing but torture to me now. But... there were times when I actually had fun with it. Not that I can even remember what that feels like anymore."

Was that his way of asking Kirisu to put him out of his misery?

Before Kirisu could answer, his friend hung up, leaving the selfish wish resting heavily in his hands.

On the day of the showdown, Kirisu Yaichirou immediately put two home runs off Koala Hills's starting pitcher. But the strain of shutting their lineup down early took its toll; Kirisu collapsed, losing consciousness in the dugout. By the time his eyes fluttered open, the game was already over. Shikura High had been defeated.

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Thus, Kirisu had lost the chance to dispel his friend's curse for all of eternity.

Immediately following the tournament, he walked away from the sport entirely, flatly turning down a barrage of offers from professional scouts. Whenever someone pressed him for an explanation, he'd flatly declare that he didn't have what it took to make it as a pro. Of course, no one save Kirisu himself could comprehend the conflicts stirring within his soul.

But there was one more story left to tell.

The following year, Koala Hills High—having aggressively rebuilt their entire strategy around the lethal arm of Iguruma Kazumi—fell short in the District Championship finals. On the morning of the ultimate game, their ace was abruptly removed from the starting lineup due to injury. Though Sekura Yumiya, their second-year captain, desperately tried to fill his shoes, the championship ended with their crushing defeat.

Four months later, Iguruma Kazumi was quietly expunged from the rolls of Koala Hills High School in the form of a voluntary withdrawal. Not a single soul

mourned his sudden retirement, nor did any seek out the young genius. Every remaining detail of his life thereafter was left to the darkness.

7 / S.VS.S-3

(8/15)

At the tail end of his long account, the slugger in front of me let out a heavy, exasperated sigh.

We were sitting inside a messy room with a scattering of cardboard boxes left unpacked on the floor. Within the confines of my apartment, Kirisu Yaichirou had spent the last hour nonchalantly unravelling the story of his youth.

"So you two were friends?"

"Back then, yeah. Haven't crossed paths since we were kids. Ain't that just the way it goes with grade school friendships?"

"I guess. Still, you should've dropped that bombshell back in high school. The media would've had an absolute field day."

Once upon a time, two geniuses had inhabited this city. Honestly, the word 'genius' was nothing more than a convenient label people reached for when they couldn't be bothered to find a real compliment.

However, every now and then, actual monsters—anomalies recognised by everyone without exception—would manifest in reality. This was especially true in the realm of sports. Every athletic discipline operates under an ironclad framework of rules, which means quantitative records inevitably endure. There was no need to resort to abstract, flowery praise to validate a player's calibre. Numbers held the objective truth; statistics slotted every individual into their precise tier within the hierarchy.

In that sense, both Kirisu and Iguruma Kazumi had more than earned that label.

And by some cosmic joke, the two of them just happened to be childhood friends who once pushed each other to the brink. It was a coincidence so convenient that it was starting to rub a total layman like me the wrong way.

"And that's exactly why I kept my mouth shut. Who gives a shit about the past anyway? Wouldn't it piss you off if people started digging up random garbage from your childhood?"

"Mm... No argument there. Still, I'm amazed no one ever blew your cover. What about your Little League records? I can't believe none of your old teammates ever let it slip to the press. Remember that massive feature article they ran on you? The reporters had every opportunity to drop that bombshell during those interviews."

"Those bastards, huh? They jumped at every single chance to exploit my name, but not one of 'em ever dared breathe a word about Iguruma."

"Ah, so that's it. Giving up on a talent you can never hope to replicate is easy. But jealousy rears its ugly head when you believe a little extra effort is the only thing separating you from the other guy. Can't say I don't see where they were coming from."

That must've been one of the things that frustrated Kirisu back then. Then again, there was no point sitting here playing the philosopher over Iguruma's tragic backstory. Kirisu hadn't bared his soul just to fish for my sympathy.

"One bad pitch and he's a dead man, huh? Every single delivery is practically a round of Russian roulette. Six whole years of that, and he's still kicking. Guy's a damn monster."

Even if Iguruma Kazumi operated strictly as a relief pitcher, an earned run average of zero wasn't something a mere mortal could accomplish. If he was consistently taking the mound around the seventh inning, it perfectly explained why Koala Hills never surrendered a single point in the latter half of a game. I had always known his record was freakish, but I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that a ball had never gotten past him across his entire career. Had he been a starting pitcher, his roster would have never conceded a single run.

A serial killer whose background, identity, and even appearance were all shrouded in darkness. All he had was the name of Sinker.

Honestly, I couldn't have conjured a title that suited Iguruma Kazumi more flawlessly if I tried.

"His career ended with an elbow injury in the summer of his third year. Did he overwork himself or something?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. There was no way in hell he was ever going to last with a style like that. He was destined to tear something apart sooner or later. The two of us... we figured out how to play entirely on our own. Sure, a coach can help streamline a practice, but their actual, most critical role is ensuring a player's longevity. Thing is, Iguruma couldn't stand the thought of being coached. He always told me that coaching wasn't meant for someone like him. Said it was a luxury reserved for people who could afford to waste time."

"....."

As someone who was born a societal weakling, perhaps that was his unconscious method of rebellion. He fought through each day with absolute disregard for whether a tomorrow awaited him. It was only because he had nothing left to lose that he could march in a straight line toward a merciless collapse. The brand of baseball Iguruma Kazumi engineered in isolation was always meant to burn out in a flash.

In the end, that right arm of his was left powerless to stop anything.

"And after the Agonist Disorder took hold, he resurfaced as a Possessed. I don't see how it could be anyone else... but are you absolutely certain it's him?"

"The fuck does *that* mean? You *spoke* to—oh, right. It happened during the daytime. Never mind, forget I said anything."

"Hm?"

Kirisu batted his hand through the air like he was swatting something away.

As terrifying as the thought was, it was starting to look like I'd recently had a run-in with a serial killer. All I could do was pray I wouldn't be crossing paths with any more psychos anytime soon.

"I'll make sure to note that down. Kirisu, what exactly do you want to do about Sinker? You know as well as anyone that there's no curing Possession. Do you wanna hand him over to the police or let him fade into an urban legend?"

"That's none of my business. If the cops manage to pin him down, fine. It's gonna be a pain in the ass for SvS, but the police can't afford to sit on their hands with this many victims piling up. Personally, I couldn't give less of a rat's ass about a psychopath who goes around slaughtering people for no reason."

"If you say so. Speaking as a fellow pacifist, I'm right there with you. But still, I don't think Sinker's killing people for no reason."

"What makes you say that? Sure, he's free to convince himself his life is on the line with every pitch, or whatever mantra he wants to tell himself. But what gives him the right to foist that same rule onto the batters?"

"Well, yeah, but I don't think he's doing it 'cause he wants his opponents standing on level ground with him. Sinker's a reckless dumbass, but there's a principle behind his actions. Once someone's in his sights, the only thing he strips from them is their life. He doesn't touch their wallets, nor does he desecrate the corpses. That only checks out if there's an entirely different impulse driving it. I just don't know what it is. Regret? Revenge? Obsession?"

The time I'd spent dealing with Possessed under Ms. Mato's watch hadn't been just for show. Every single one of them had suffered some manner of collapse—but it never occurred without a catalyst. There was always a core grievance at the centre of their existence driving every action.

"Revenge and obsession, huh?"

Kirisu's face darkened, looking as though a missing puzzle piece had just slid into the recesses of his mind.

The guy might as well have been an open book. He was still hiding something from me.

"Come on, man. I don't wanna have to say this, but—"

If possible, I wanted to wash myself clean of any involvement entirely.

"You could at least, you know, try and talk him out of it."

"Hell no. Like I said, I don't give a shit about what happens to him."

"Yeah, yeah."

I barely managed to bite back the urge to ask him why the hell he had dragged me into this mess if he truly didn't care. The truth was transparent: he wanted Sinker stopped, but he simply couldn't bring himself to be the executioner. Because if those two ever ended up face-to-face on a diamond again, they would probably end up destroying each other.

"And that's the real reason you won't take him on yourself, isn't it? Oh, right. You refuse to stand in the box ever again, huh?"

"Yeah. I'm done with baseball, and having to wager my life on a swing doesn't make it sound any more enticing. Besides, you think a human could hit a pitch like that?"

"Good point. That's our biggest problem here."

If we attempted to challenge him conventionally, death was the only outcome waiting at the plate.

Now that we'd established his devil's pitch was the real deal, we knew we'd just be throwing our lives away. No, what terrified Kirisu most was the possibility that it wouldn't even be a match.

If he failed to hit, he would lose the chance to save his friend. But even should he somehow succeed, he would be signing the boy's death warrant.

What a cruel set of rules. From the get-go, Kirisu had absolutely nothing to gain by going up against him.

"Never mind that for now. What about this? How would you try to beat him if you were in the box?"

"What kinda dumbass question is that? There's no way in hell anyone hits a two-stage sinker. Theoretically speaking, making contact with any ball that enters the strike zone is possible, sure. But a batter only has a fraction of a second to work with. You only have until the moment you identify the pitch to calibrate your swing. It's physically impossible to react to a ball that breaks a second time mid-air."

Unbelievable.

Hearing him say it only emphasised why people used to call Kirisu Yaichirou a freak of nature. As long as the ball entered the strike zone, he was capable of lining his bat up with it perfectly.

Blessed with an absurd level of static visual acuity and freakish nerve conduction velocity, his brain could instantly focus his muscle fibres onto a single point. He had never once tasted the frustration every other batter lived with—the

agonising experience of knowing exactly where a ball would land but being unable to intercept it.

For this genius slugger, identifying the pitch and sending it screaming into the outfield was just standard operating procedure.

"A pitch that breaks twice ain't baseball no more. Adapting to the first break is easy enough, but the second's completely out of the question. It only breaks that second time after the batter has already committed to the ball's trajectory. It's like a question where the solution alters itself the exact moment you submit your answer. It's just flat out impossible."

"Exactly. Which means there's no point taking Iguruma on unless we remove this roadblock. You sure 'bout this, though? Word on the street is that his pitch cuts at a right angle. I dunno if that's beatable, even without a second break."

"Only if it were our first rodeo. Heh, how many damn times do you think I've faced Iguruma? I couldn't give less of a shit how much his ball bends. If he's standing on the other side of that mound, my instincts will level the playing field for me. One pitch is all I need to calibrate."

In any man-to-man discipline, the sharpening of instinct had always been inseparable from experience.

Pitchers and batters were the ultimate manifestation of this principle: both the swing and the delivery would miss without the right kind of mutual attunement. Because of that, this particular duo were regarded as the most compatible within the sport. On top of that, they'd played thousands of games amongst each other since childhood, meaning Kirisu had long since gotten a read on his every habit.

Despite Sinker gaining the ability to slaughter any batter, there was still no easier opponent in the world for Kirisu.

Which brought the conversation right back to that impossible, two-stage breaking ball. That, and the reason Kirisu had walked away from baseball.

"And yet, I can't ask you about that, can I? We're just running in circles at this rate."

I stood up, signalling an end to our conversation.

No one in the world had the right to question his reason for quitting baseball.

The man everyone believed to be utterly immune to any setback had willingly severed his own connection to the sport. It was like a bird intentionally clipping its own wings. I had no way of understanding his torment, nor was I brazen enough to pretend otherwise. However—

"So why did you go out of your way for Sekura Yumiya?"

As his friend, I felt that I had to make this clear.

"Only because I was paid to shelter him. That's just the kinda person I am now."

"Looks like you've learned a thing or two while I was away, Kirisu. Still the same fast learner as always."

Only this time, the curriculum he had mastered was how to survive as an adult. Catching on to my snarky remark, Kirisu clicked his tongue and pushed himself up from his seat.

"Enough of this garbage. Forget SvS ever happened, and leave Sinker to the cops."

Turning his back on me, he walked straight into the adjoining room and unceremoniously collapsed onto my mattress.

"Dude, what the hell?"

Wasn't this motherfucker leaving?

"I'm in a bit of a pinch right now. The cops got their hands on the karaoke building I've been using as a base of operations. You still have your family's place to fall back on, don't you? Let me crash here for a while."

He drifted off into a heavy sleep almost instantly, without even pretending to wait for my permission.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that? Not that I mind, though."

Perhaps I'd been overthinking it. Maybe there wasn't any deeper reason behind him quitting baseball.

(sink)

The creature's right arm ached. Last night, it had struck down its seventh opponent without the slightest hint of compunction.

◇

It trembled violently, as though in the midst of a blizzard, despite being bathed in the fierce glare of the summer sun.

Its mornings always began this exact way. The biting pain of cold and a suffocating tightness around its lungs roused it from its dreams.

Having only just awakened, its body had yet to regain anything resembling human function. Both its intellect and consciousness remained frozen solid. After drifting through the abandoned factory like a ghost, its mind finally began to surface as it rinsed his face by the sink.

A hooded serial killer stared back at it from the clouded mirror.

Gazing upon its own reflection, it recollected the several targets it had already killed.

The first had been a mere warm-up. A sacrifice used to test its newfound capabilities.

The second had served a concrete purpose. A low-priority target on its schedule, yet sheer coincidence had driven him up the list.

It found itself wondering whether this summer was running cooler than usual. After that particular match concluded, a harsher frost had settled deep into its bones.

The third had been an exception. It had gotten slightly carried away. In the heat of the moment, it had overexploited its elbow and wasted far too much blood. The joint had remained entirely shattered for a full day afterward.

The fourth had been a swift execution, streamlined by its growing experience. It had revelled in the destruction, hoping to return home even a day sooner. Yet, even then, there were brief lapses where it began to forget why it had launched this murderous crusade in the first place.

The fifth had been—

The sixth had been when it lost all sound. It was also when it realised its elbow was taking longer to knit back together. In the beginning, it only throbbed after a match had concluded. Now, an agonising current of pain surged through it after every single pitch, its old wounds warping and widening. But it didn't matter. Even if the elbow snapped completely, it only needed to tether its consciousness together while the ball was in mid-air. It was no more than a mere roadblock. After all, it had dragged itself forward using that exact method this entire time.

Finally, the seventh. It wasn't until it noticed the brain matter pooling across the floor that it dawned that it was over. After counting the four balls it had expended, the memory of that day's events sluggishly pieced themselves together.

"Ah... gh..."

It drew a long breath.

Something was terribly wrong this summer. The oxygen felt so thin it barely registered in its lungs. Its elbow creaked under the weight of the glacial temperature. The entire city had gone dead silent, like a long-haired *teru teru bozu* doll hanging by its neck above a dinner table.

"Ugh..."

Assailed by a wave of sudden nausea, it shook its head violently from side to side. It didn't actually mind the drop in temperature. Long before this, summer had already been a frozen landscape inside its own head. The breathlessness didn't bother it either; this heavy, suffocating air was just part and parcel of the season.

It was the absolute silence that it couldn't stomach. It had always gravitated toward loud places. Needless clamour and ruckus were like music to its ears. It starved for those deafening roars of adulation that used to wash over it from all sides.

But now, it couldn't hear a single thing. The cold would vanish the moment the game began, and the pain would go with it. And yet, strangely enough, it could feel its capacity for sound eroding further with every passing match.

"Agh..."

It could no longer recall why it was subjecting itself to such anguish. Driven by nothing but a residual spark of wrath, its right arm began to move on its own. When it had hunted down its very first victim, a blinding, white-hot fury had consumed its entire brain. It had vowed to leave not a single bone intact, surrendering its senses to that burning passion. It was only when it pitched that it felt truly alive—that it could feel the same heat it once possessed as a human being.

Yet, even that same pleasure was gone now. No sound could penetrate its ears anymore. It reached out, touching its reflection in the mirror, its lips peeling back in a bitter display of self-derision. Where had that cruel, sweltering summer it so desperately wanted to escape gone?

There was no such thing.

It never even existed in the first place.

"Gh..."

It had zero recollection of what it actually felt like to enjoy a game. That was the first piece of itself it had lost. Baseball was nothing more than pain—a drawn-out act of torture that rewarded it only with a mandate for more of the same. It had lived inside that loop for six whole years before arriving at the present.

As that conclusion solidified, its consciousness was finally shocked awake.

Its frigid brain slowly ground to a halt. Nothing but suffering lay ahead of it. The only reprieve came during a match. The only time its lips pulled into anything resembling a smile was when it was snuffing out human life.

What had gone wrong with that fifth victim?

Could it truly say it had enjoyed itself back then? The fifth murder had been completely unintended. In fact, it hadn't even set out to track the man down. The victim had been a total stranger—a formidable batter it simply happened to cross

paths with while it was looking to kill time. All it wanted was a brief entertainment. It had no intention of taking his life, yet only the irreversible truth of a corpse awaited it in the dirt. Irrespective of its own desires, its baseball had transformed into a mechanism that could only rob people of their tomorrows.

"Right... the... next..."

It was standing on the precipice of irreversible collapse, both in body and in mind.

Unfortunately, it was utterly oblivious toward the gravity of its own ruin.

To begin with, it was only within a match's surge that its rationality resurfaced in any meaningful way.

But even that temporary sanity was on the verge of freezing over from the creeping summer frost.

Sinker reached out to its silver cell phone. A blinking light on the screen marked its next prey. With the GPS granted exclusively to the ace, it pinned down the whereabouts of its eighth victim.

▪

(8/16)

The number of Sinker's casualties had now reached a total of seven.

Though the task force had initially taken Sekura Yumiya into custody as their prime suspect, the sudden emergence of a sixth and seventh victim the very next day forced a massive overhaul in their approach.

With Inspector Touma Mato at the helm, the investigation was officially reclassified as a special case falling under Agonist Disorder.

While the authorities had not conclusively verified Sinker's identity yet, it was only a matter of time before the full weight of the police force led them straight to Iguruma Kazumi.

To be precise, tracing that line would likely take them a single day. Another day would be spent laying the necessary groundwork to prepare for a manhunt through

the valleys—or rather, through the alleys. And finally, one more day for the tyrant up top to forcefully initiate the chase.

Biased though I was, Ms. Mato's past exploits all pointed to one invariable conclusion: three days would be more than enough for her.

▪

"That was the last hint I needed. 'Cuz I noticed that only the fourth one wasn't an official SvS batter. After that, everything just sorta crashed into place. I mean, doesn't that strike you as a little too sus? So I started digging into the background connections. Seriously, I can't believe no one caught onto this sooner!"

Under the glimmering sun, Tsuranui Mihaya doubled down on her grand hypothesis, triumphantly brandishing a thick stack of bond paper.

"Arika, did she really just say 'everything just sorta crashed into place'?"

Kaie whispered a word my way, his voice intentionally hushed out of mindfulness.

"Just ignore her. We'll be here till sunset if you keep nitpicking her phrasing. Trust me, she's someone I've had to put up with for years."

Since Tsuranui was hogging the entire sofa, I grabbed a folding chair, hitched it up right beside Kaie's bed, and sat down to listen.

"The fourth victim's name was Shinohara. He used to play for Koala back in high school. On top of that, more than half of the other victims were also from Koala. I know they're all seasoned players and whatnot, but doesn't this feel like way too many wild Koalas are getting picked off?"

"Sure looks that way. The fact that their current ace, Sekura, is already tangled up in this is fishy enough on its own. If the Association catches wind of this, Koala's probably getting hit with a two-year ban."

"Uh-huh! And nobody on the team, 'specially their captain, don't get to prizefight just 'cuz they're not favourites this year. When I asked a couple of frens who used to go to Koala, they be tellin' me Sekura'd gotten super weird. Kept going on about how it was stupid to take baseball so seriously, and that everyone should just do

whatever they wanted over the summer. Hahaha, d'you think some kinda curse could make that spoiled brat go bald?"

"Cut him some slack. He's already been through enough hell. Besides, it's not like he actually meant any of that. Guy just had to put on that front to convince himself."

"Oh? How can you be so sure, Senpai?"

"Because he was Possessed. His arm would've never ended up like that if he didn't care about baseball."

If my hunch was right, Sekura Yumiya was devoted to baseball in his own way. The dilemma he faced lied in how he lacked the capability to measure up to his ideals.

After all, his predecessors were the previous ace, Komagiri, and the strikeout king himself, Dr. Iguruma Kazumi. The sheer weight of expectation his peers harboured toward him must've been crushing. He might've been a standout in Little and Senior League, but he amounted to nothing more than a run-of-the-mill player when faced with the irrational gifts of true geniuses. Ultimately, he had thrown himself into the underworld of SvS precisely to escape that suffocating reality.

Just like any other competitive sport, the world of high school baseball was a cruel one. Every single opponent you faced had spent an equal, if not greater, amount of time training in the dirt. They shared the exact same convictions and raw talent as anyone else. In the end, over a thousand athletes in each prefecture battle it out, only to be ruthlessly thrust into the depths of defeat.

Only a chosen few, blessed with talent, dedication, and luck, ever emerge victorious. For the longest time, Sekura Yumiya had believed himself to be one of them. Unfortunately, he was too perceptive for his own good. He was *just* sharp enough to realise his confidence had been nothing but empty arrogance, and for that reason, he desperately tried to run away from the truth.

He couldn't make the cut in the brutal world of high school baseball. He couldn't reign as the absolute ace. And so, he went searching for an alternative stage where he could still be the centre of his own universe.

"Ugh, so you're saying that spoiled brat jumped ship to SvS 'cuz his winning streak dried up?"

"Isn't that the natural conclusion? Like you said, he's a spoiled brat. Someone from his background's got no business jumping into SvS just for the cash."

"Ah, right."

He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. What truly filled Sekura Yumiya's heart was feeding off the envy of those around him.

"Honestly, that just makes him so much worse of a guy. Maybe he really does deserve a curse cast on him. Specifically, one that makes his hair fall out."

"Really got a bone to pick with him, huh? Does that have something to do with Sinker targeting Koala members?"

"Mhm. Um, I'm not really sure if I should be saying this here."

Tsuranui trailed off for a moment, her eyes shifting toward Kaie with sudden hesitation.

"You needn't concern yourself. Matters of this nature happen to be precisely my forte. You really are quite the kindhearted lady, Ms. Mihaya."

Adopting an oddly demure air, carrying himself with the effortless grace of a closeted princess, Kaie offered her a gentle smile.

"...mm!"

Entirely unaccustomed to receiving genuine praise from anyone, Tsuranui's face instantly flushed a vivid crimson.

"Th...thank you very much! Wait, no, that's not what I meant! S-Senpai, why didn't you warn me he was this sweet?! I can't take it! He's too dazzling to look straight at! Darn it, he's so perfect I feel like I'm going to melt!"

I stared at her. What kind of bizarre evil spirit was she supposed to be?

"Wait, if looking at Kaie makes her melt, doesn't that make her one of the good guys? Eh, whatever. C'mon, out with it already."

"Ah! Right, sorry. Please don't get upset at me for what I'm about to say, 'kay, Kaie? Um, it's mostly just a rumour, but apparently, there was some sort of incident within the Koala Hills team last year. The school did everything it could to keep a lid on it, but word got out that someone had been ganged up on. After that, they pinned the blame on their captain Iguruma and pushed him off the team. Remember what I

mentioned before? That's the real reason he was suddenly subbed out on the day of the finals."

"Except the story was that he hurt his elbow. If so, why'd you make it sound like he was one of the damn perps?"

"Eek—S-Senpai, you're freaking me out! This is exactly why I didn't want to bring it up… But unfortunately, it's every bit as bad as you're picturing! The ones who went after him were a bunch of second- and third-years, and the one they all ganged up on was Iguruma himself! They'd decided he wasn't worthy of his place on the team, and his elbow… but the school made him out to be the bad guy… until he showed up in Sekura's classroom in December and went for him before a teacher pulled him off… and so he withdrew…"

Tsuranui spoke in fits and starts, doing her best to sand down anything that might get under my skin or Kaie's.

"And… yeah, that's about the gist of it. Whaddya make of it, Senpai?"

"Why the hell does my opinion matter? Just pass me that file, right now."

"Wuh?! No! Nononono, pleath, Thenpai!"

I snatched the stack of paper from her hand as she scrambled around.

"Oh, I wanna see too. Over here, Arika."

The devil beckoned me over, having caught the scent of fresh blood.

I settled onto the mattress and began leafing through her report.

As it turned out, her cute handwriting was actually rather stylish.

◇

The attack on Iguruma Kazumi allegedly took place the day before last year's district finals.

Due to the school administration scrubbing any mention of the incident, no official records existed, leaving a total vacuum where concrete data should have been.

But this document laid bare the reality behind Iguruma's shattered right elbow and mangled fingers.

It was the manifestation of his teammates' concentrated malice.

Iguruma had always played baseball in absolute isolation, never once seeking the cooperation or camaraderie of his team.

Nevertheless, according to Mihaya's notes, there was a greater catalyst motivating their violence: the Iguruma family's crushing poverty. His subterranean standard of living was plain for anyone to see. For a long time, his teammates had written off his frayed uniforms and broken-down home life as something beneath contempt.

The fact that his household was barely surviving on the margins was beyond dispute. His tuition was fully covered by an athletic scholarship, but even that kind of charity wasn't enough to afford him a single shred of a normal student's life.

To make matters worse, his mother had never managed to hold down steady work. She existed on the absolute fringe, scrounging a pathetic pittance by foraging the streets for empty cans and bottles.

Her territory was vast; she couldn't earn enough to survive without working her way through two or three different residential complexes stretching around the train station. After a full day of punishing, footsore labour, she would gather the cans—sticky with whatever stagnant residue remained inside—crush them by hand, bag them, and haul them to the local recycling depot. The kind of backbreaking, gruelling work literally anyone could do. Even so, after all of that, a bill or two was all she ever had to show for it.

To a casual observer, she was indistinguishable from a garbagewoman. Yet that never once stopped Iguruma's mother from burying her head in the filth and toiling onward.

Having married and divorced at a young age, whatever educational footing she might have used to climb out of the underclass had never gotten off the ground. The relentless exhaustion had long since hollowed itself into the lines of her face and the rhythm of her spirit. For a woman with nowhere else to turn, this squalor was simply a life sentence she had to endure, no matter how much it degraded her.

Unfortunately, the world has no mercy for that kind of struggle.

The sight of her combing through garbage bins must have struck nearby residents and students as a pathetic joke. How did it feel to Sekura Yumiya—the

pampered second-year slated to succeed Iguruma—to know that he was fundamentally inferior to a boy raised by a literal garbagewoman?

"A beggar like that actually has the nerve to look me in the eye?"

Despite being in his second year, Sekura was ultimately still a kid. He possessed no mercy for those he deemed weaker than himself. The impending violence wasn't driven by hatred but by vanity and a warped sense of justice. To Sekura and his sycophants, having an upperclassman they considered subhuman occupying the team's absolute throne—the ace's seat—was an error they simply could not stomach.

Sekura was a boy blessed with everything: generational wealth, social status, and the full backing of the school faculty. Therefore, to him, Iguruma Kazumi was nothing but an eyesore that needed to be purged from his sight.

On that fateful evening before the finals, eight club members of differing years assaulted Iguruma, ensuring his forced withdrawal. In the end, Sekura Yumiya secured his long-coveted title of ace a full year ahead of schedule. Karma eventually exacted a small tax in the form of a crushing defeat, but that did absolutely nothing to alleviate Iguruma's torment.

Four months after his body was broken—on a freezing day in December—Iguruma barged into the middle of Sekura's classroom. He was restrained by a panicked group of teachers before he could inflict any damage. Naturally, the administration handled it with a stern reprimand. With his career already in ruins, the school saw no reason to champion a spent force, and he was henceforth punished under the guise of voluntary withdrawal. What became of Iguruma Kazumi after he crossed that threshold, nobody knows.

A few students claimed to have spotted him drifting through the streets, but those rumours never escaped the realm of speculation.

◇

"……"

Her report was remarkably well-constructed and cut straight to the core of the matter.

It wove together hearsay picked up from alumni with firsthand recollections from current club members.

The administration's suspicious manipulation of the incident, Iguruma Kazumi's violent outburst on school grounds back in December—after scanning through the data, it wasn't difficult to map out exactly what had transpired.

The only part that bothered me was the large blank between August and December. Nothing on these sheets gave me enough leverage to surmise why he had sat on his revenge for four whole months.

"So that's it. Sinker's been hunting the same people who targeted Iguruma."

The names of his victims lined up perfectly with that year's club roster.

Including Sekura Yumiya himself, who was currently cooling his heels in police custody, only two targets were left standing on the board. The fifth victim, Gondou, had no relation to Koala Hills; he was merely the unintended casualty of a stray ball. Knowing the background, I couldn't quite bring myself to immediately write Sinker's actions off as pure evil. How could someone who'd been oppressed all his life be capable of harbouring any love for humanity? To him, the people responsible for destroying his life and those who had nothing to do with it had likely blurred into the same undifferentiated mass of existence.

"One more thing, Tsuranui. Does Kirisu know about this?"

"I think so. I mean, he's the one who tipped me off about where Iguruma lived."

"Tch."

An involuntary click of the tongue escaped my throat.

I finally realised why he had taken such an incredibly roundabout approach to this case. Sinker's identity and motive had already been completely clear to him by the time the second victim dropped.

He got me into SvS because he wanted me to take Sinker down. He knew full well how formidable a foe Iguruma Kazumi was, yet he'd come to the conclusion that Ishizue Arika had a shot at felling him. As much of a massive pain in the ass as he was, a small part of me was kinda glad that he placed so much faith in my skills. Unfortunately, that's where things took a turn for the worse.

The serial killer's true identity was no longer that of a human named Iguruma Kazumi—he had fully inverted into a lone Possessed known as Sinker.

Kirisu must've lost his shit when he witnessed Sinker's pitch for the first time. A devil's pitch that broke in two distinct stages. He must have instantly deduced that I stood absolutely no chance against that monster, even back during my heyday.

"And that's why he told me to back off, huh? Damn. That dumbass actually put his brain to use for once."

I handed the report back to her.

I had originally asked her to dig into Iguruma's background because my own hands were tied with other baggage, but she had turned out to be a sharper sleuth than I had ever given her credit for.

"Thanks, I appreciate the hustle. Sorry for taking up your time. I'm sure you had better things to do, like wander around town aimlessly."

"Aw, don't sweat it! You can always count on me, Senpai. As you can see, I'm a thoroughly trustworthy woman."

She slunk forward, deliberately mimicking the posture of a sultry corporate secretary. While she looked the part, she was, regrettably, missing both the chest and the glasses the role called for.

"Did you notice, Arika? He's nothing like a Possessed."

After skimming the report over my shoulder, Kaie posed an odd question.

"What makes you say that? His shattered elbow completely restructured itself. Oh, and his two-stage sinker's absolutely crazy. We're talking a freaking 150-kilometre-per-hour breaking ball, y'know? I don't see how he's anything short of a monster."

"You're missing the point. I'm talking about why he transformed, not how. Consider his disposition. Aside from having a clear objective, he's nowhere near weak enough to fall prey to Possession. He's carried that desire for revenge since long before he broke, hasn't he?"

"Hm..."

Now that I turned it over, he had a point.

The majority of Possessions were triggered by the fear of an unknown threat. An unrecognisable pressure originating from one's environment. A baseline notion one had given up on overcoming.

Factors such as these were what hollowed a person out from the inside, and within that vacuum, they were reborn as Possessed—their brains rewiring themselves to forcefully address the situation.

However, Iguruma Kazumi was cut from a different cloth. Going off what Kirisu had told me, he wasn't the type to fold that easily. Despite the shock of losing his elbow, he'd gone out of his way to make an attempt, unsuccessful as it was, to make Sekura answer for what he'd done. With his strength of will, there should've been no reason for him to fall apart after losing his elbow.

"You're right. We may have erred by assuming revenge was his primary motive. Did he decide to execute them after his match began, or did he only participate in SvS because of that grudge? It would be the latter if pure revenge was the goal, yet that still fails to explain why he insists on challenging them within the confines of a match every single time. If murder was his only objective, he could have easily slaughtered them instead of wasting his time. Yet for some inexplicable reason, he harbours an obsession toward the game of SvS. There must be some motive concealed within that. One that we currently have no way of parsing. Do you see what I'm getting at, Arika? He won't stop as long as that core motive goes unresolved."

Kaie's read was that Iguruma Kazumi wouldn't stop pitching even after he had successfully put down all eight of his targets.

If that was true, then what the hell was actually driving him?

The answer was obvious. The only mechanism deeper than revenge was fixation. The entity known as Sinker possessed something far more important to him than taking revenge on the people who had robbed him of baseball. He had an irresistible mandate that compelled him to remain on that mound as a pitcher.

"Well, he sure as hell isn't doing it for kicks. From what I gathered, he stopped enjoying baseball a long time ago."

He had literally begged Kirisu to crush his pitch with everything he had. He had openly confessed that he couldn't even remember what genuine enjoyment felt like anymore.

Therefore, only a single variable remained on the table. Iguruma Kazumi was still trapped inside that crimson park. He was continuing his solitary game of baseball, desperately awaiting the arrival of his sworn rival.

"He's been waiting for Kirisu all this time, hasn't he?"

Tsuranui gave voice to the conclusion without a single shred of hesitation or embarrassment. Moments like this were precisely where airheads somehow proved their worth.

"That absolute idiot of a geezer. All he ever had to do was swing his damn bat."

And unfortunately for us, Tsuranui was right, as she always was.

His driving force as a pitcher boiled down to one desire: a direct showdown against C Prefecture's greatest slugger. If that was what his soul craved, then his game wasn't going to conclude until Ms. Mato shot a beehive's worth of holes into his torso three days from now.

"Oh? You siding with him now, Arika?"

The devil on the bed chuckled wickedly.

"Not a chance. Honestly, just listening to this crap pisses me off. I couldn't care less whether he makes it out of this alive or not."

Those were my honest feelings. I didn't possess a single shred of sympathy for the guy.

Things might've played out differently if necessity had driven his hand, but I had nothing to spare for a monster that killed purely to quell its own mind.

Had it not been for the specific circumstances, I'd have already scratched his name out of my notebook and moved on to the next job.

"Very good. By the way, you do realise your end of this arrangement isn't wrapped up yet, yes?"

Except, there was that one glaring problem.

I still had to take care of the task written down in my notes. I had already forgotten the exact sequence of events that led to me accepting the job in the first

place, but it was abundantly clear that the paperwork remained open. On top of that, the current trajectory implied that I would have to give it my all over these last three days.

It wasn't the worst position to be in, though. I wanted the money, and it wasn't like anyone was going to literally kill me if I botched the attempt, so I wasn't entirely opposed to giving it a solid shot.

"One thing's been bugging me this whole time, though. What the hell are you doing here, Tsuranui?"

The next moment, Kaie and Tsuranui's gazes locked in mid-air.

"It's really no biggie, Senpai! You were just heading out for work when I came by to drop this off. So I, um, kinda couldn't help myself and wound up tailing you."

Apparently, I'd gotten myself a stalker. One who was fully convinced she could get away with it.

"Since you didn't say anything, I assumed she was an invited guest of yours, much like Kirisu. She didn't react when she saw my body, so I figured you had already briefed her on my circumstances beforehand."

He looked over at me, casting an inquisitive gaze my way.

"....."

Everything had technically worked out in the end, mostly because Kaie didn't seem bothered by her presence. She'd always been curious about my employer, so this was bound to happen sooner or later. If anything, I should have been relieved to have gotten that particular headache out of the way ahead of schedule.

"Well, Tsuranui? What's the verdict?"

"Lemme see. I'm kinda relieved he's a guy. But at the same time, that almost makes it worse somehow? I dunno, I can't really put my finger on it, but this guy's totally bad news, boss! That's the vibe I'm gettin'!"

How many damn Tsuranuis were there inside her head?

▪

Kaie sent me off with a smile, ordering me to head out and earn my keep.

He handed me his prosthetic out of concern for my safety, and despite my initial hesitation, I eventually decided to accept it. Since I was about to head on an investigation, being reported as some shady, one-armed intruder loitering around the premises was the last thing I needed. If that happened, I'd likely end up on the receiving end of Ms. Mato's newest form of disciplinary action—getting stuffed into a punching bag and wailed on for good measure. And so, I chose to wear the mechanical limb and blend in as best as a freak like me could.

After finally convincing Tsuranui to knock it off with the stalking business at Shikura Station, I hopped on a bus bound for Nouzu Industrial Complex.

Nouzu possessed a unique atmosphere that set it entirely apart from the rest of Shikura. It felt like a self-contained island cut off from everything but its own residents.

The industrial sector, which spanned roughly three kilometres from edge to edge, and the housing blocks which contained its workers were quite literally all there was to see. Consequently, the place suffered a total lack of outside visitors.

Equipped with its own marketplace providing every basic necessity, most families born in Nouzu saw absolutely no reason to ever venture beyond its borders. Meanwhile, the opposite was true for the rest of us. No ordinary citizen had any business coming out this way unless they were locked into a shift at one of the factories.

It was like its own small city within another. A web of communities thrived among its various apartment blocks, with a total population of eight thousand people occupying roughly three thousand homes. Though it gave the impression of being entirely isolated from the external world, that obviously wasn't the case. A mere thirty minutes on a bus was enough to breach the perimeter, and the municipality had even constructed a Nouzu Industrial Complex subway station recently. The only reason people still referred to it as a solitary island was due to the lack of a nearby station, though to my mind, it had always been closer to a hilltop fortress.

Perched atop a stretch of rising hills, the Nouzu Industrial Complex stuck out like a sore thumb against the horizon. Looking up at it gave the impression of gazing upon a hulking battleship that had run aground, left to rust out right where it had beached.

I stepped off the nearly empty bus at a stop near the west entrance of the complex.

No sooner had my boots hit the asphalt than the midsummer sun rained down upon me mercilessly.

"Ugh. Aghhh.... ghhhh."

Before I knew it, I was wheezing like a zombie.

The sweltering heat, registering well over thirty degrees, instantly sapped my body of any motivation.

I mustered whatever strength I had and kept trudging down the sloping road, the rows of massive apartment blocks lined up beside me like giant dominoes. Framing the blue sky was a dense forest of trees—originally planted for the mental well-being of the residents, but now encroaching upon the concrete land.

At first glance, it looked like the perfect place to beat the summer heat. However, there wasn't a single soul passing through the area, giving the sector the eerie aura of an abandoned ruin from a horror flick. To top it off, a handful of housewives were peering down from their upper-storey windows, quietly casing me with askance glares as I walked by.

"No wonder this place breeds ghost stories. Which block was it where that cop vanished again? Oh, great, it's further in."

According to my map, this western entrance was the equivalent of a mountain trail's second station.

As for the missing policeman, it was a ghost story that had made the rounds just last month. Tenants from a neighbouring block had reported strange activity inside one of the structures, and some gung-ho rookie patrolman freshly assigned to the Nouzu precinct that year had charged straight into the building to demand answers. He vanished off the grid the very next day, only to be discovered stuffed inside a dumpster by a garbage truck driver a week later. With their reputation on the line, the police launched an investigation, yet they were ultimately unable to dig up a single

concrete clue. Due to the total lack of viable suspects, the case had apparently gone cold.

The building in question was O-Block Thirteen. I didn't know if my map was just outdated or what, but for some reason, the diagrams only printed up to block twelve. It had an ominous number attached to it just like my own apartment, which at least served to make it incredibly easy to remember.

"Right. Note to self: stay the hell away from those buildings."

Fortunately, my destination today was a nearby factory site. While I toyed with the idea of checking out the park Kirisu used to play in, one glance at the map made me scratch that option entirely.

I made my way down a sloping road wide enough for three lanes. The only vehicles operating on this street were massive industrial trucks that thundered past every ten minutes, their mechanical roars dragging me back from the Nouzu Delusion Complex to the real world.

Arriving within Nouzu proper, I found myself in the midst of several factories. If you ignored the towering apartment complexes slicing into the sky above, Nouzu looked like any other ordinary factory town.

Getting my priorities straight, I immediately initiated my reconnaissance, surveying the area's various facilities.

Some sites were entirely sealed off, while a couple lacked even a basic security presence. Aside from those, a few were in varying states of active construction, and I even stumbled across one layout that would have been perfect for a department store. There were four possible prospects I had identified beforehand that met the conditions. Having worked through all of them, I decided my next stop would be Iguruma's home.

The place was situated on the outskirts of Nouzu.

With a river engineered for water processing serving as its immediate backdrop, the property was a rental *nagaya*—a longhouse that looked as though it had been frozen in time during the late 1920s.

"Excuse me, is anyone home?"

Discovering no doorbell to speak of, I eased the sliding door open and called into the dim interior. A few moments later, a voice drifted over from the garden.

"Oh my, a visitor? How unusual. We don't get a lot of teenagers around these parts."

Her bright, almost buoyant tone caught me off guard.

"Good day. I'm here to ask a few questions regarding Kazumi."

"Ah, I see. Please, come on in. Wait, is that a baseball bat you're carrying? Do you play the sport too, dear?"

Her enthusiasm only amplified the moment she noticed the sports bag slung over my shoulder.

Somehow, the fact that I habitually kept my bat on me at all times had ended up working in my favour. I had come here fully expecting a mother who would be less than pleased with my questions, yet her immediate willingness left me feeling increasingly bewildered.

After two long hours, I finally succeeded in piecing together Iguruma's four blank months. I scribbled down anything worth holding onto, thanked her for her time, and took my leave.

"Damn it. Is it really still this early?"

I shot my golden cell phone a surly look.

There was still about an hour until sunset, yet I stood there on the pavement, hoping it'd arrive any second sooner.

▪

After sunset, the temperature dropped from thirty-four degrees to thirty, doing wonders for my comfort. Now that I'd forgotten everything I needed to, I devoted the remaining hours to investigating more prospective locations. At ten o'clock, I finally found an abandoned tenant building that ticked all the boxes.

As usual, I made my way home on foot in an attempt to save some cash and get some exercise. Since my body was my livelihood, and with only one functional arm to

work with, I had to keep myself in shape so I wouldn't become dead weight in an emergency.

Walking through the unfamiliar roads of Nouzu, I eventually stumbled upon a group of teenagers running a baseball game right in the middle of the asphalt. There were about twenty of them rowdily enjoying themselves on the street. Despite there barely being any pedestrians, they had gone out of their way to block the traffic lanes off with poles as they continued betting on their rogue game of SvS. Honestly, I couldn't decide whether they deserved a nod of respect or a roll of the eyes.

"Well, that's just the nature of games."

It was no time to be getting sentimental, yet here I was.

The players were out here because they deemed this game worthy of their time, even if it was no more than a ridiculous farce to anyone watching from the outside. And yet, the man who had once wanted nothing more than to stand at the heart of that farce forever could now only ever watch it from the margins.

While doing everything he could to help everyone else bask in the remnants of summer, he himself turned his back on it all.

Each of the two geniuses had their own pasts.

Kirisu Yaichirou gave up baseball of his own volition, while Iguruma Kazumi had it taken away from him by his peers. Regardless of how it happened, the curtain had already come down on both of their summers.

The man who threw everything away left the stage, while the one who lost it all stood as a vengeful spirit stripping batters of their lives.

"It's too late for their paths to cross again."

Had Kirisu settled the score with Iguruma two years ago—no, as long as he had never given up on baseball—this tragedy wouldn't have happened.

But I had no standing to hold that against him. After all, we were barely scraping by. Gathering up burnt-out ashes and trying to find a new creed was a pain in the ass. Besides, there was no way something loved that deeply could turn out to be so easily replaced.

"Right. There will never be a replacement. All we can do is seek something similar. But still, what's wrong with that? There's no need for anyone to push themselves to the brink in search of the exact same thing."

By discarding that very emotion, the man who was once called a genius protected his love for baseball. Kirisu had dutifully honoured his own code by accepting that what had once been irreplaceable was irreplaceable no more.

He had no intention of degrading it by tearfully clinging to the past. Had he not given up on baseball, he would've demeaned both the sport he loved and the time he spent devoted to it. And so, baseball would become just another event buried within his recollection.

By putting up a front of having no regrets, he honoured both the radiance already lost and the one still fading away.

"He and Iguruma are exact opposites. There was never any chance they'd come to an understanding."

Due to some mistake, their roads ended up overlapping anyway.

The genius batter never cared about results, prioritising enjoyment over anything else.

That was why everyone said he lacked the talent needed to go pro. Kirisu swung his bat not for his own sake, but for baseball's. That kind of unalloyed purity must have been almost painful to be around for anyone who hadn't been handed the same gifts.

"....."

Averting my gaze from their riveting game, I continued on my path home.

There were no trains here that ran in the direction of Shikura. Needless to say, that meant I couldn't take a safe road along the tracks.

I walked along the four-lane highway until I hit a bypass split between up-and-down lanes.

Since I was on foot, I made my way underneath the intersecting overpasses.

Beneath the bypass lay a dark, unpopulated road extending into the distance. The rumble and vibration of cars above drifted down every now and then, but it was so quiet beneath the bridge that I felt like I'd wandered into a different world.

I arrived at a narrow parking lot with no cars inside.

The city was lit in a pale blue, revealing a strait of asphalt bleeding away into the dark ahead.

Suddenly, I heard a ringing sound from my pocket.

A stabbing pain assaulted my left arm.

Retrieving the golden phone, I took a good look in front of me.

Under a streetlight eighteen metres away lurked a hooded phantom. I flipped the phone open and powered it on.

"You... are you a batter?"

A hoarse voice crackled through the speakers.

I really should've been cowering in fear right about now, but all I could think about was how impressive their matchmaking system was.

"Sinker."

Stopping in my tracks, I set my bat down on the ground.

As a pale breath curled from his mouth, the unfamiliar hooded man stepped out of the shadows and into his ninth victim's line of sight.

◆

Just like that, Ishizue Arika had been marked by a serial killer.

Phone pressed to my ear, I listened to the inhuman rasp of his breathing coming through the line.

Summer was supposed to be the season for ghost stories. But instead of catching sight of a lady in white upon a foggy bridge, I found myself locked in a staring contest with a wandering soul beneath the ghastly glow of a streetlight. The phantom glared at me desperately, looking as though he might collapse onto the asphalt at any moment. I couldn't help but pity the unwavering dedication he possessed.

"Hurry up... and answer me... already."

His voice was so faint it could've been mistaken for static.

Standing on the literal verge of death, he clung frantically to the last embers of his festering resentment.

The sight before my eyes was completely at odds with my image of the vicious serial killer who had already robbed eight people of their lives.

That was Sinker?

His limbs were shivering from the cold, even though I was the one who should've been trembling in fear.

His timid eyes glanced sheepishly in my direction, when, by every right, I should have been the one casting around for an exit.

Everything down to our positions was completely inverted. Instead of begging for my life, I was now the one being forced to endure his pathetic pleas for salvation. Sinker repeated himself, his voice carrying the hopeless tone of an animal destined to be hunted.

"Hey... you're... a batter... right?"

Like an addict who possessed no other desires, he desperately begged me to accept his challenge.

"....."

I considered running away at full speed for a moment before rejecting that thought in two seconds flat. For Sinker's right hand, swallowed up by his oversized sleeve, had been wrapped around a baseball from the moment he stepped into the light.

I couldn't let myself be deceived by that voice, tormented as it was by the searing chill. He was not someone worthy of my pity. Since ancient times, it was always the voices of spirits crying out for salvation that dragged the living down into hell with them. He was no more than a wraith seeking another one of his own. Escape was out of the question; the only way to walk away from a ghost once you'd laid eyes on it was to drive it off.

I picked my bat up. There was no need to worry about my left arm. After all, the dark prosthetic had been blazing with life since the moment Sinker revealed himself.

"Fuck me. Do I chalk this up to good timing?"

I'd never have taken him on if two coincidences hadn't lined up perfectly tonight. First, the fact that I now knew the full truth behind Iguruma's story. Second, the fact that Kaie had pressed his prosthetic on me before I left. I felt my blood boiling with an unfamiliar heat, the mechanical limb giving me a sudden surge of confidence. To hell with it. I'd give him exactly what he wanted. Besides, I still had no idea what actually triggered his left arm.

"Or do I just curse my rotten luck?"

I gripped the handle with both hands and brought the bat up.

Letting both shoulder blades drop loose, I settled the wood across my shoulder.

I was in perfect condition. Though my pulse was racing, a little excitement was necessary when you were putting your life on the line.

"It's a deathmatch you want, right? Bring it on, you goddamn freak."

I fired the words straight back at his incoherent muttering.

Sinker's mouth warped into a jagged sneer. His right arm fluttered in the air as he snapped his cell phone shut.

There was no signal to signify the start of the game.

In the next instant, he launched into his crude yet polished motion.

He started with a sidearm shootball from his right hand. Threatening to drill a hole straight through my sternum, his 130-kilometre-per-hour breaking ball stood zero chance of being tracked by an average batter.

A weak sound echoed through the underpass. The ball veered off course in a completely different direction than I intended. After making loose contact with my bat, his pitch disappeared into the darkness beneath the bypass instead of finding fair territory. This was known as a foul ball. It was a failed hit that was considered a strike against the batter but wouldn't be added to the count if there were already two strikes.

"Huh... wha...?"

From eighteen metres out, I watched Sinker's face crumple in utter disbelief. The first pitch was a draw, leaving me with one strike. The foul was entirely due to an error on my part; I'd taken a fraction of a second too long to shift my weight before

committing to the swing. Dealing with asphalt instead of dirt meant I had to stomp my rear foot harder into the ground to counteract his velocity.

"...!"

With his eyes wide in shock, he immediately readied his next pitch. Another shootball. The fact that he launched it on the exact same trajectory only made me pity him. What a waste of raw talent. Had his previous opponents truly been that incapable? His pitches were akin to works of art, but overconfidence had allowed a fatal predictability to burrow into his rhythm.

This time, the impact was cleaner.

The second foul skipped off the asphalt, kissing much closer to fair territory than the first.

He let out a gasp of astonishment.

"Listen up, dumbass. I'm gonna send that shit right back at your face if you throw another one of those."

The count was two strikes, but I had his timing nailed down by the second pitch. If he dared to throw another shootball, the match was over.

"Why so surprised? Haven't you heard of the two geniuses of Shikura Hills? Well, they only called me that 'cause they needed a posterboy. Still, I was Shikura High's standout slugger right up until Kirisu got his act together, for whatever that's worth."

I let my shoulders drop and rolled the bat loosely through the air.

Seeing him stand there, stunned that I'd matched his speed twice in a row, I decided to rile him up a bit more.

"Hey, pitcher. You're gonna die if you don't get serious soon."

"Gh... hah...!"

Light returned to Sinker's eyes.

The third pitch was a slider that drifted well outside the strike zone. Needless to say, I didn't bother swinging. The fourth pitch was a shootball thrown inside, countering the previous outside tracks. Snapping barely within the strike zone, it ended in another foul due to my own error. Then came the fifth pitch. Another foul.

Followed by a close ball on the sixth. He delivered his seventh pitch, resulting in yet another foul on my end.

"...Gh."

I was the one getting overconfident. He was clearly starting to adapt; each consecutive pitch grew faster and sharper with every ball thrown. But that wasn't the only problem here. A chill ran down my spine, erasing the summer heat from my mind entirely. His gaze pierced through my skin, conveying his unrelenting desire to strike me down. My stomach turned. Every last one of his festering emotions came swarming over me like a locust plague.

The count was two strikes and two balls, with seven pitches already spent.

A bead of sweat formed on my forehead, with my mind being stimulated further and further every time he raised the gear of his pitches.

Batting was inherently a collaborative effort between batter and pitcher. By keeping precise tabs on every micro-movement the pitcher made, a batter could time their first step to break in perfect sync.

Therefore, batting was never truly a battle against the pitcher, but a test of absolute synchronisation between the two players. A flawless harmony of thoughts, breathing, and physical motion was necessary—only then would the wood connect cleanly with the leather. Naturally, Ishizue Arika was capable of perceiving his opponent's internal condition as though it were his own.

"Ha... haha! I'm finally awake, goddamnit! See, I knew you had it in you!"

Therefore, I sensed his bloodlust the exact moment it awakened alongside his fury.

Everything finally lined up.

Whatever hollowness he'd been dragging around earlier had been shed entirely.

His eyes were ablaze with life, fervour permeating throughout his entire body. His mouth bore a fearless smile—the true face of the serial killer who had taken the lives of eight batters.

Karyou Kaie had said he didn't understand why Sinker was so obsessively fixated on baseball, but the answer had been clear all along. Baseball was as natural as breathing to him. Just as anyone deprived of oxygen would simply cease to exist, baseball was something Sinker couldn't be stripped of without ceasing to be a person at all.

Obsessions of that scale were the quintessential symptom of Agonist Disorder. This fiend had been utterly consumed by his delusion, rendering him unable to live as an ordinary human. Unlike Sekura Yumiya, he was Possession distilled down to its purest form.

"Uh… what now?"

Despite all my bravado, I'd somehow blundered into the exact same trap as every one of his previous victims.

The white wisps of breath I'd been tracking from beneath his hood were gone. As the match continued to heat up, so too did he continue to regain his rationality. At this point, the killer standing across from me was no longer a pitcher I had any realistic shot of shutting down.

Still, that didn't mean I was completely powerless. He was probably going to pull even further ahead with the next throw, but I could likely stave off a strikeout for one more pitch. That is, if he threw a normal breaking ball.

If he opted for his devil's pitch—the notorious, two-stage sinker—I wouldn't even have the reflexes to react.

"I was wondering why you looked so familiar. You're Ishizue-senpai, aren't you?"

After all this time going unrecognised, he suddenly called me by my name.

"Hm? Have we met before?"

Hardly the moment for small talk, but the question caught me too off guard to simply brush past it.

"You kidding me? Even I remember what we talked about—ah, so that's it. You mentioned having that issue before. Man, what a sick joke. Looks like you've got your own set of problems."

He spat on the ground, clearly irritated by my condition.

"But it all worked out in the end. You wouldn't hear me out back then, but things played out differently this time around. I'm glad I got to go up against you, Ishizue-senpai. They didn't call you Shikura's Diamond for nothing. Too bad, though. The game would've been over by the second pitch if you still had both arms. Aren't you gonna make any excuses for yourself?"

He was right. With my original left arm, I could have countered the pace of his pitch and kept it from glancing off into a foul tip. But that did nothing to change the reality right in front of me.

"No reaction, huh? So, concentrating on the next pitch is all that matters to you now. Tch, you've got a good look in your eyes. Such a shame, really. You were always one of my benchmarks. Had things gone a bit differently, I might've even looked up to you. But to be honest, whenever I thought about your situation, it was always unease I felt before respect."

He gripped the eighth ball in his hand, fresh blood seeping down his right arm.

I couldn't tell if it was an old wound reopening or a new one tearing apart. His right arm began to creak as though the bone itself were screaming from being overused.

"But that all ends here. It's time for me to set you free. I really should thank you for joining SvS, Ishizue-senpai. It's been a long time since anyone's given me any kind of entertainment. Honestly, I can barely tell what's going on around me anymore, but I wanted the chance to duke it out with a batter like you before it's too late."

He prepared to throw his eighth pitch.

The premonition of ruin bearing down on me in two seconds was alleviated by the emotions flowing from my left arm.

Danger had become a foreign concept to me long ago, and whatever fear managed to surface was immediately painted over by the prosthetic.

I was in a state of complete calm.

Which was precisely why I wouldn't hesitate, even as I walked myself down the death row.

"You sure about that? Isn't there another batter out there you actually want to settle the score with, Iguruma Kazumi?"

Nothing would stop me from coldly delivering the words he needed to hear most.

"...!"

His motion locked midway, his piercing bloodlust suddenly evaporating.

It was a natural reaction. There was simply no version of Iguruma Kazumi that could ever ignore that question. After falling silent for a few seconds, Sinker opened his mouth, then shook his head violently to dispel his lingering regrets. He was working to convince himself—trying to swallow the idea that the batter he'd spent his entire life waiting for was already gone.

"Right. Sure, I get you. There's no point in expecting anything from him, Sinker. He's a coward who quit baseball and ran away from his rival. Unfortunately, you're right. He's nothing more than a shitty third-rate batter now."

"Cut the crap."

Those three words were all it took to reignite the flames of his bloodlust.

This wasn't the muddy, chaotic anger from before. Having the absolute core of his belief ridiculed, a righteous fury now enveloped his right arm.

"He's always been the greatest batter there is. That hasn't changed."

I understood that perfectly well.

He possessed an absolute strength that never faltered. His talent was pure gold—however thick the rust had grown over his joints, a single swing was all it ever took to dust it off and find the same blinding brilliance underneath. Both Iguruma and I held that natural-born gift in a kind of awe that sat somewhere far beyond envy.

"That's the kind of player Slugger is," the murderer in front of me declared.

The pitcher was still waiting for his batter up to this very moment.

Sinker still believed in him, even as he cursed him as a traitor.

What a waste of my time. Now that I was in the crosshairs of his devil's pitch, there was a very real chance I wasn't making it out of this underpass alive. Why did I have to give myself up to the temptation of this left arm? The truth had been written on the wall from the very beginning. My role in this story wasn't to defeat this pitcher.

"Sorry to keep interrupting your monologue, Sinker. But since we're already at it, I've got one more question. What comes after? When it's all said and done? Are you just gonna keep doing this forever?"

At the rate he was going, he'd run out of batters in this city before summer was out. What did he intend to do after massacring everyone who took baseball away from him? Would he simply go on playing this murderous game as naturally as drawing breath?

"....."

Hadn't even crossed his mind, had it? For just a moment, Sinker dropped his gaze to the bloodstained ball in his hand.

"I... when everything's all over... I'm going home. I've been gone for too long. I need to hurry up and get back so my mom can see I'm alright. And that's why... that's why I need to seal all of their mouths shut and return to baseball."

"Iguruma..."

I shouldn't have asked.

This wasn't the role I was meant to play. Stopping this Possessed was someone else's duty. Understanding that, finally, was what made me take this exorcism seriously for the first time.

"Return to baseball? What do you call *this* then?"

"You think this crap is baseball? I will stand on a real mound as a pitcher again. For that, I'll kill everyone who knows what happened to me. I'll make it so that everyone who ruined my elbow, and everyone who knows I can't play anymore, will never be able to speak again. The same goes for anyone who knows that I'm a Possessed. I'll silence each and every one of them."

"....."

He'd already gone through an irreversible collapse.

Since everyone responsible for injuring him knew he could never pitch again, they'd inevitably harbour doubts if they saw him on the field once more. Needless to say, their minds would naturally turn to something illegal—steroids, specialised procedures, whatever. It didn't matter. They couldn't be allowed to say a word. The moment that happened, he'd lose everything all over again. Both the mutation he

gained from his Agonist Disorder and his new life as a pitcher would vanish into thin air.

That was why he had to kill them. It was not for the sake of petty revenge, but so that he could continue to stand within a silent stadium that he was slaughtering anyone who knew his truth. Of course, I was no exception to that rule.

"You're just another person who knows that I'm Iguruma Kazumi."

He fastened his grip on the bloodstained ball, this time electing to drop low into an underhand delivery.

He released the ball to signify the end of our dialogue, the leather slicing through the air as it vanished from my sight.

There is no such thing as a ball that breaks twice. No matter what amount of spin or force a pitch is thrown with, it can only travel sideways and downward. In the process of being dragged earthward by gravity, a ball can break horizontally or vertically depending on the rotation applied to it. In other words, no ball can suddenly break to the right with a left-hand spin or break upwards with a top-spin. It is simply impossible.

The sinker—an underhand pitch thrown close to the ground—rides an upward trajectory born from the low arc of the pitcher's delivery before the downward spin takes hold and breaks it mid-flight. Therefore, what sends it climbing initially is not the spin itself, but the path the arm cuts through space on the way to release.

However, the pitch I just witnessed shattered every one of those preconceptions.

It vanished from my field of vision entirely. Thrown to the left of my shoulder, the ball broke violently to the right while scattering a phantom spray of crimson petals through the air, finally snapping upward toward my jaw the exact moment it entered the strike zone.

For half a second, I stood there frozen, unable to even initiate a swing, barely managing to jerk my head out of its path.

"....."

So that was how it worked. I couldn't deny the sheer astonishment vibrating through my chest, but witnessing it firsthand—with the faint scent of flame lingering in the air—finally allowed me to piece the mechanics together.

"I'm sure you already know, but I missed on purpose. The only reason your head is still attached is out of respect. We're at two strikes and three balls now. It's the end of the line for you now that we've reached a full count. What are you gonna do, Ishizue-senpai?"

I wasn't gonna do shit.

With that last pitch, I'd gotten a rough handle on how his devil's pitch actually worked.

But having cracked the admittedly breathtaking physics behind it didn't mean I had the first clue how to answer it.

Basically, I was ninety-nine percent screwed. The remaining one percent came down to swinging completely blind with my eyes shut, praying the wood would somehow meet the leather—and that it'd catch the sweet spot when it did. Someone with Agonist Disorder might've managed, but such a miracle was completely out of the league of an ordinary human like me.

"It's time. You're gonna die if you don't hit this one."

He fastened his grip on the ninth ball.

It was over for me the moment he initiated his windup. I'd end up getting my skull bashed in by the ball even if I started dashing toward him this very second. And turning my back to run would be as good as painting a bullseye on the back of my head.

"Gh...!"

As the venomous heat from my left arm finally ran out, my vision began to flicker under the absolute terror of death. Danger had long since become a foreign concept to me. But fear was another matter entirely. In other words, it was only when faced with certain death that Ishizue Arika got to remember what it felt like to be a normal person again.

Regret came far too late.

Realising I should have never accepted his challenge and kept my distance, I watched Sinker raise his right arm to his chest.

With the beginning of his windup, I had only a mere second left before my impending death.

"Time out! I'm, uh, calling a substitution. Hinomori Shuusei of the Blazing Arm's comin' in for that lazy bum over there. Jersey number's 4649. Burn it in yer mind."[1]

Suddenly, a man in a black coat materialised out of the dark, towering in front of me as though he were a barrier protecting me from death. His coat billowed out behind him like a pair of wings. I had to admit, the bastard knew how to make one hell of an entrance.

"You're…"

"Sup, kid. This is what they call a pinch hitter, ain't it?"

Turning his head halfway, he flashed me a cocky grin. Needless to say, Sinker was utterly stunned by the sudden appearance of an intruder.

Still, no matter what the underworld rules were, that sudden stop was a definitive balk on the pitcher's end.

✠

"Yo. You wanna have some real fun, don'tcha? Just leave it to this old man over here. I'mma put on a show worth stickin' around for. A helluva lot more fun than roughing up this perfectly healthy lad over here. At the very least, you'll be able to die with a smile on your face."

With mirrored sunglasses masking his eyes and a heavy coat hanging loose off his shoulders, the man who once introduced himself as Hinomori Shuusei was now shooting the breeze with a serial killer as though he'd bumped into an old acquaintance.

[1] 4649 can be read as Yoroshiku in Japanese, a phrase that can mean anything from "Nice to meet you," "I'll be in your care," to even "Counting on you."

In his hand, he held some sort of pole that was thinner and longer than a bat. If one were to venture a guess, it resembled a wooden sword swaddled in cloth. Even worse, it appeared he genuinely intended to take Ishizue Arika's place in the batter's box with that thing.

"Wait, what the hell are you—"

"C'mon, no need to sweat the small stuff. Go find yourself a corner to cower in, my friend. Though I wouldn't say no to a bit of cheering from the peanut gallery. Always wanted someone out there hollerin' my name, just the once. You know what gets me? All those meatheads in the stands oughta just shut their pie holes instead of feedin' their own egos. Stacking rubble in your backyard's a better use of anyone's time, and it's a damn sight more fun to boot. But when push comes to shove, the moment those roars of encouragement wash over you, whatever's been sittin' dormant inside the player just comes surging straight up!"

Letting out a hearty laugh, Shuusei swung his long weapon from side to side. All Ishizue Arika could do was stand there in shock and retreat backward. To be more precise, it was less the pole throwing him off and more the words coming out of the man's mouth.

"What the hell do you mean you're subbing in? Do you have any idea what you're dealing with here?"

"Course I do. He's that serial killer everyone's been going on 'bout, yeah? If I'm being straight? The kiddo doesn't quite tick all my boxes, but half's more'n enough to get me off the sidelines. You just sit back and watch. And by the way, I ain't doing this 'cause I wanted to save your skin, so there's no need to feel indebted to me. But if you really wanna offer your thanks, we can call it even with that meal I swiped from you the other day."

With his long hair and coat dancing in the wind, he turned to face Sinker, tightening his grip on the handle.

"I don't know who you are, but..."

Sinker shifted his gaze from his previous target, backing up another metre to adjust his footing for the phantom who had just hijacked his stage.

"Anyone who stands within that box is my prey."

The murderer's eyes kindled with manic fury.

Not only had his winning pitch been interrupted, but his newest challenger was entirely too carefree. Sinker put his life on the line for every single match he played. It was only natural that he wouldn't tolerate an interloper—above all, the man's attitude was a direct blasphemy against his sacred game.

A deathmatch it may be, but it's still just baseball. There's nothing to fear in a game between mere children.

That was the silent implication radiating from the older man.

"Three pitches are all I need. Don't worry, you might come out of this alive if you're lucky."

"....."

Drinking in the full brunt of Sinker's bloodlust, Shuusei's mouth merely hooked into a wordless, vicious smile.

A confrontation between a murderer in a hood and a phantom in a coat.

The scene was utterly unfit for a summer night, let alone a peaceful city. The ambient rumble of the traffic running above us felt miles away. Ishizue Arika, meanwhile, had retreated to the relative safety of a nearby vending machine.

"Damn, this must be my lucky night. It's a hundred-yen vendo."

In the meantime, he decided to sip on some coffee while enjoying the show.

Unfortunately, Shuusei's absolute confidence didn't translate to skill with a bat.

Within two minutes, disappointment contorted his smile into a scowl, having whiffed on two back-to-back pitches, running himself into a swift two-strike count.

"Big talk for a halfwit. Nothing's gonna happen if you just stand there."

Unperturbed by Sinker's provocation, the man in the coat continued to show zero signs of apprehension. He hadn't swung his weapon a single time since taking the box. If anything, he carried himself as if swinging at these pitches was beneath him.

"Man, this is harder than I expected. Figured it'd come to me on instinct once we got goin'."

He then proceeded to yawn.

That settled it. Despite being in a situation where Sinker's 140-kilometre-per-hour breaking ball promised inevitable death, the bastard had grown weary with sheer boredom.

"Y'know, all this darkness really ain't doing it for me. Gotta be real with you, I ain't getting no buzz. Tell you what, big man. As two fellow Possessed, whaddya say we kick it up a notch?"

His dark coat fluttered, giving rise to a surreal sight. After dipping his knees, the man had launched himself skyward in an explosive takeoff.

"Pffff...!"

The next moment, Ishizue Arika found himself involuntarily spewing coffee all over the place.

The lunatic had just vaulted himself a clean six metres into the air. Tucking into a graceful somersault that would've garnered straight tens from any panel worth its salt, he vanished over the edge of the bypass.

"Now, all we need's a nice and flashy spotlight for our show!"

Since he was stuck watching from below, Ishizue Arika couldn't witness his exact actions with his own eyes. Still, it didn't take much for him to fill in the blanks.

Almost instantly, the shrill, deafening scream of locking brakes pierced the night. The driver up there must have been utterly paralysed with terror.A natural reaction, having witnessed a grown man suddenly dropping directly into the headlights of a car travelling at close to 70 kilometres per hour. Whether the driver managed to swerve in time remained unknown. The only certainty was that the first screech of tyres bled instantly into a second, and then a third, cascading into a chain reaction straight out of a cartoon.

Absolute hell broke loose above the bypass.

Every single collision fed the next, until the bridge transformed into a churning sea of fire. An endless loop of brakes locking up, laced through with the shriek and crunch of steel folding in on itself. Completed by the screams of its casualties, the ungodly orchestra continued its performance above the bridge. And when the crescendo finally burned itself out, the root of all the chaos showed his face at the edge of the bridge.

"Ain't half-bad for an improvisation. Get up here, kiddo. We've finally got ourselves a playground worth a damn!"

The man guffawed, hellish flames occupying his entire backdrop.

With over twenty people left in critical condition and a miraculous zero fatalities, the Shikura Highway Pileup Incident would eventually be written off by the media as a freak mass accident—at least until the man's reappearance forced that verdict back under scrutiny.

His name was Hinomori Shuusei, the highly-wanted culprit behind a bizarre string of serial murders in the far south of C Prefecture two years ago. A Possessed rumoured to be a vampire, he had escaped in the midst of his transport to Origa Memorial Hospital, never to be seen again.

What had Hinomori Shuusei seen in the heart of the inferno?

Sinker scaled the concrete pylons like an ape, hauling himself up and over the bypass. He may have lacked the logic-defying ability to soar into the sky with a single leap, but his raw physical capabilities clearly eclipsed those of any ordinary human.

Climbing onto the elevated stage, Sinker confronted his fellow Possessed, his unbridled bloodlust and hostility radiating through the smoke.

"Just what I'd expect from a real man. You can keep that side of the highway as your prize. As you can probably tell, I prefer to stand over here."

Even though the bypass had been transformed into a flaming hellscape in under two minutes, only the left lane had been reduced to pure bedlam. On the opposite side, cars continued to thunder past despite the wall of fire surrounding them.

The only real abnormality in that lane was the man standing dead in the centre of traffic. Amid a hail of iron bullets hurtling past at seventy kilometres per hour, Shuusei simply laughed, tightening his grip on his cloth-wrapped weapon.

"Time for the final pitch, kid. I'm gonna try and dodge it, so just throw the damn ball into the strike zone. At the end of the day, it's still just a ball game. Can't get the audience riled up without a bit of flare, aye?"

Hinomori Shuusei was a lunatic in his own right, but Iguruma Kazumi had long since stopped pretending at sanity himself.

"You dare call this a mere ball game?"

The outcome was already clear—his possessed right arm screamed that he stood no chance against the foe before his eyes. Therefore, only one fate awaited him. The exact instant his pitch was captured by a bat would be the moment of his execution. If he threw his third, he would be hurling his life away along with it. However, that wouldn't be enough to stop Sinker. The rage burning through his veins would not be quelled until he annihilated the man who had made light of his pride.

"Hah...!"

Paying no mind to the agonising fissure cleaving through his right elbow, Sinker locked into his delivery.

In the next instant, his arm whipped forward like a bolt of jagged lightning.

The ball zigzagged erratically through the air, completely shattering any illusion that a human eye could track its flight.

He aimed not for his opponent's body, but for the strike zone.

Sinker viewed these matches as an opportunity to trample on his opponent's honour—that was why he refused to take a victim's life until he had formally struck them out. This rule was his absolute dogma, even when staring down the barrel of his own imminent defeat. Thus, the match between the two of them was decided.

"Agh... what the?!"

In the end, air was the only thing Hinomori Shuusei's swing would cut through. It was a splendid swing and a miss, beyond the realm of any defence. A whiff so grand you could've put him on display, spinning off like a top, for all to see.

With his victory assured, Sinker would no longer hesitate to deliver his punishment. He aimed his devil's pitch directly at Shuusei's skull, setting the crosshairs on his defeated prey. He had to run. This was his final chance to escape. Had Ishizue Arika been there, he would've certainly screamed a certain set of words at him: You freaking suck, man!

"Aw, crap. No way in hell I'm hitting that. All I heard was that it'd break twice, darn it! Nobody said nothin' 'bout it picking up speed on top of that. You're a real crafty fella, ain'tcha?"

Sinker had no intention of humouring him any longer. He launched the devil's pitch toward Shuusei's flank, running parallel to the speeding cars surrounding them.

"Oh?"

After streaking past the man's shoulder and seemingly vanishing into the distance, the ball ignited with a sudden, violent spark and hurtled back toward its unguarded mark.

Just as it had with every single one of its past eight victims, the pitch charted a homing course toward the back of Shuusei's skull.

"You really think that old trick'll work twice?"

Yet, just as easily as he had taken the strikeout, Hinomori Shuusei casually tilted his torso, avoiding the ball darting toward him from his blind spot.

"Gotcha. Hitting the damn thing is impossible, but dodging's a piece of cake."

Letting his batter's stance fall away entirely, he shifted his weapon to one hand and pressed a single finger from his left hand against his lips. His long tongue crept between his inhuman fangs, licking his lips with a sickening slowness.

"Well fought, kid. Victory is yours."

Once again, his coat quivered against the gale.

It was then that the vampire finally elected to tear away his easygoing veneer.

"Still, that doesn't change the fact that Lady Luck's cast her lot with me tonight."

With a sadistic smirk taking his lips, the wolf prepared to pounce upon the lamb.

His black coat fluttering with the wind, Hinomori Shuusei casually moved a single step forward.

For some reason, that motion hadn't even registered to Sinker as that of a predator closing in on its prey.

"Tch...!"

Realising a single breath would spell his doom, Sinker immediately rushed to procure another ball. Kicking off the asphalt as he vaulted backward, he fished a ball from within his parka with his left hand and swiftly flipped it into his right grip.

At the exact instant the vampire stepped forward with his fangs on full display, so too did Sinker launch his insurmountable devil's pitch.

His movement was a work of art.

Alighting upon the roof of a stalled car, he instantly rotated his entire torso using only the support of his pivot foot. Viewed from above, his sidearm pitch drew a beautiful circle impossible to mimic without the use of a compass. Despite breaking well past 130 kilometres per hour, the ball retained a vicious, buzzing spin.

Three gyroballs achieved within two seconds, thrown with the lethal precision of a machine. With a mere half-second interval between them, each bullet rained upon its target mercilessly—arching overhead and locking down both of Shuusei's flanks.

Each ball warped along an inconceivable curve a second later, seeking the destruction of their target.

Even as an inescapable volley of invisible missiles surrounded him, the vampire met the onslaught with a peal of gleeful, echoing laughter.

If Sinker's assault was a work of art brought about by the hands of man, then Hinomori Shuusei was a natural disaster given physical form.

Having no route of escape, Hinomori began a rapid dash toward Sinker. His blinding waltz transformed him into a whirlwind raging across the asphalt, leaving even his afterimages lagging in its wake. While Sinker was capable of ejecting bullet after bullet like a machine rotator, Hinomori Shuusei also possessed the ability to move with the furious spin of a top set loose. Dancing with the grace of a ballerina, he forcibly threaded his body through the bullets' trajectories.

Unbeknownst to all, his movements were no random attempt to escape the line of fire. By grasping their trajectories the moment they curved, he avoided each and every single one of them in the most efficient manner possible.

With three balls each breaking twice, Sinker had produced a hail of missiles that altered their courses six times in total.

And yet, even that cascading storm proved utterly powerless before the man's fevered dance.

The first thing that crossed Sinker's mind was not the anger of having his ultimate technique thwarted, but a stabbing, icy dread. Something was wrong. The

man's speed was entirely different—it was as though no amount of numbers, no form of human comparison, could convey its essence. There existed a fundamental schism separating them. Throwing a ball faster than him, or trying to outrun him entirely, was a pointless endeavour. What was it that separated him biologically? So long as Sinker couldn't comprehend the answer to that question, defeating—let alone escaping from—that man lay far beyond the realm of possibility.

"Ah..."

An oppressive pall of death bore down upon him. Even with the imminence of his own beheading pressing at his throat, Sinker's mind instead drifted back to a familiar sight.

Such a realisation served no purpose within this moment, but the dark mass drawing ever closer looked just like a Catherine wheel bursting with the firepower of a tank.

"God... damn it!"

With only four metres separating them, Sinker broke free from his delusion and prepared his fourth pitch. Having less than a second to complete the windup, he could impart neither the requisite speed nor spin upon the ball.

"I won't die here!"

A mediocre fastball, trivial for the monster before him to evade. However, this pitch was infused with a trait peculiar only to him. This was the true identity of his two-stage sinker. Now, the blood-speckled devil altered its trajectory once more, sending it bolting directly toward its target's face.

"Dude. Did you not hear me? I can see right through you."

In the end, even that desperate gamble was no more than a trifling roadblock to the vampire.

His dark coat flared skyward like a crow taking flight as he landed squarely on the hood of the car. Weapon resting at his hip in his left hand, he avoided the sparking devil's pitch from his blind side with nothing more than a casual tilt of his neck.

"Ah... gh..."

"Gotta commend your creativity, kid. Smearing yer blood on the ball lets you create an instant propellant once it goes off. For any clueless jackass, it sells the illusion

that your pitch bends to your will. But every one of 'em had it wrong, thinking your mutation was in your elbow. It's the explosive blood. That's Sinker's true identity, ain't it? Well, I'll be damned. Didn't figure I'd cross paths with another lunatic willing to burn their own tainted blood for fuel."

For all his offhand phrasing, not a shred of warmth coloured the man's tone.

Sinker stood frozen in place. Resting by his hip, the man readied his weapon, more akin to a spear than a blade. He gripped it tightly, its release inevitable at any given millisecond. Sinker remained transfixed by naked terror, as though the cold mouth of a rifle had been pressed to his brow.

"Why so surprised, comrade? One glance's all it takes to work out a party trick this plain. For what it's worth, even the ankle-biter down there saw through it. 'Tis what it is, but I ain't denying that's your own original technique. Ain't nobody gonna mimic the same feat, not without the same inhuman spin you produce. I'm guessing twice is the maximum for an object the size of a baseball? Any longer, and it'd just burn out from the inside! Still, man, that's one wasteful way of goin' about things. You won't last another week if you keep doing this crap. Not that it matters anymore, though. No amount of care for your body is gonna change your fate now."

The vampire's face drew ever closer, bearing down on Sinker as if he were about to gorge on his neck.

"...Ah."

I don't want to die. Someone save me!

Terror welled in both his eyes.

Such a reaction was only to be expected. After all, he had glimpsed, if only for an instant, the eyes lurking beyond those mirror lenses.

They were of a stark, unblemished white, like that of a maddened Prajña. Their hoarfrost sheen seemed to leech the very life from any and all who beheld them.

"Gh..."

Shuusei thrust his left arm forward, pointing his long weapon straight toward Sinker's neck.

As his mind grew numb from the impending death awaiting him, Sinker's mind arrived at a single, bizarre revelation. Why had it taken him so long to notice? The man's weapon was neither a blade nor a spear. In truth, it was the spitting image of a giant wooden stake—the kind forged specifically to vanquish the vampires of yore.

✠

The rising flames set the night sky aglow, giving rise to an even more ominous sight.

It had been just about four minutes since I'd taken refuge beside the vending machine to spectate the chaos above. Separated by a full six metres of altitude, all I could make out were the deafening crunches of colliding steel.

Now, however, the uproar had finally ebbed, replaced by the far-off wail of approaching sirens. Sticking around any longer would be asking to get hauled in, followed by Ms. Mato's pulse-spiking crash course in torture. I flicked my coffee can into the bin and made to call it a night.

"Man, that was tight. Going up against the real deal with all those flames and shit just ain't worth it. Oh, you still here, kid? Didn't think ya would stick 'round to watch the whole show. Gotta give it to your folks for raising a decent kid."

"....."

Before I could leave, the black-coated sicko came crashing down from above. Holding the same wooden sword—no, it was more like an iron pipe with a diagonal tip—he wrapped it up in cloth once again and then started cracking his shoulders. Judging by his relaxed demeanour, the curtain had officially fallen on our little drama.

"What's wrong? Cops're gonna screw you over if ya don't get outta here soon, y'know. By the way, I'd highly recommend keeping my existence under wraps if they do pick you up. If you don't, then don't expect to get outta there for a while. Oh, but if you really feel like spillin' the beans, I wouldn't mind the publicity either. Still, I figure you'd rather be home before 1:20 AM, right?"

"Sorry to break it to you, but I'm not about to start singing to the cops just because you told me to. More importantly, did you take care of Sinker?"

"Hell yeah, I did. Struck out like crazy," he declared with a cool smile plastered across his face.

What an absolute disaster.

"Dude, what the hell? You still struck out after pulling all that crap?"

"No need to get all worked up over a warm-up. It was always gonna end with a battle to the death anyway, so why not let 'im take centre stage for the opening act? As a responsible adult, least I could do was send 'im off with a bang."

His lips warped into a smile once more. This time, it was a predatory curl that bared his true colours, one that was capable of unsettling anyone who saw it, just as his appearance implied.

"Does that mean Sinker is..."

I couldn't bring myself to finish my question.

With the fire raging overhead and the sirens closing in, my left arm began to ache even harder than it had when facing Sinker. Every single chaotic element in the air was forcing me to accept the sheer irrationality of the situation, yet I still couldn't muster the courage to utter that one final word.

"Huh? Nah, the kid's still kickin'. Didn't see the point in killing him. Looked like he wanted to run away when he was on the brink of death, so I gave him the chance to do just that. What was it called again? Catch 'n decease? Wait, no. That's backwards. Uh, catch and decrease? No? Ah, there it is! Catch 'n appease! Still wrong?"

"....."

I stared at him blankly. When would this dumbass ever take anything seriously? Even after causing all this mayhem, he had set an injured Sinker loose once again.

"Why the long face, kiddo? Ain't no issue in lettin' him off. It's already too late for him. He's running on a one-way road to self-destruction. He might look alive, but the entire right side of his body's already dead."

It wasn't Shuusei who did that to him, but rather Sinker himself. In other words, Sinker's collapse wasn't only affecting him mentally.

"If you say so. How much longer do you think he'll last?"

"There ya go again with your optimistic assumptions. For the record, I'd never spare anyone who still had a shred of real life left within them, no matter how damn small!"

He let out an amused chortle, casually throwing a hand onto my shoulder with a wide grin.

"Listen up. He's already reached the point of no return. There's zero chance of him making it out alive—after all, we've been lookin' at a dead man this whole time. He's like a machine running on its final drops of fuel. The poor guy is destined to become a piece of scrap the moment the flames of his obsession burn out."

Removing his hand from my shoulder, Hinomori Shuusei turned on his heel, ambling away into the shadows without a single care in the world.

"Wait, I've got one more question. Was it just a coincidence that we ran into each other here?"

"C'mon, seriously? You really think the world's built that conveniently? I was over at Shikura looking for someone when I felt the premonition of a battle. Seemed like a good time, so I hauled ass over here!"

"Uh, the premonition of a battle? That sounds way more convenient to me, Hinomori."

Seriously, did this guy think we were characters in a manga or something?

"Don't worry. I get you, I really do. I'm a huge superhero fan myself, but even I gotta say this is kinda pushing it. Regardless, that ain't changing the fact that there are people in this world who can sense these things. Unfortunately, my hunch only turned out to be half right tonight."

He set off into the dark again.

Above us, the first flash of red emergency lights began to slice through the smoke as the police cruisers finally rolled onto the scene, their sirens reaching a deafening crescendo.

"Oh, right. I've got a question of my own."

He stopped dead in his tracks, his back still turned completely away from me.

Despite the angle of his body and the five-odd metres between us, I knew a single breath would be all it took for him to close the distance and take my life.

"Mind tellin' me where you picked up that prosthetic of yours? I've seen a similar leg before... but this is the first I've ever heard of an arm like that."

In an offhand tone, he posed a question I couldn't ignore.

▪

It had been a while since I parted ways with Hinomori Shuusei, the shady bastard who was anything but your model citizen.

Down in the underpass, the mounting crowd of bystanders had stirred up a commotion. Thanks to the police's severe lack of manpower to question every suspicious individual on the scene, I managed to slip through the perimeter undetected.

As for that parting shot of his, I left it hanging in the air unanswered. All things considered, I owed Hinomori for saving my life, sure, but not to the point where I was particularly beholden to him for it. And while basic social decency would have dictated I humour him to a certain extent, it was a question I couldn't answer—no matter how much I might have wanted to.

By the time I finally trudged back to my apartment, Kirisu was already planted in front of the television like he owned the place.

News of the incident from an hour ago hadn't hit the airwaves yet. I couldn't say for certain whether C Prefecture's local news outlets just sucked at their jobs or whether the media coverage had been intentionally blacked out, but the smart money was on the latter.

"No need to sweat 'bout casualties, kid. Makes it sit better with you, right? Hm? That ain't the issue? Repair fees? Overall damage? Use yer head, bruddah. The only fellas who don't carry car insurance nowadays are the ones driving dirty. I made damn sure the cameras got a good look at me, so there's no way in hell their insurance claims

are gettin' shot down. Hell, they oughta be rolling out in brand-new rides off that payout!"

Such had been Mr. Hinomori's offhand appraisal of his own civic responsibility. Right about now, the police were probably tearing their hair out over the footage of some suspicious nutcase caught dead-centre in the headlights.

"Took your sweet time. Didn't you say you'd be home by seven?"

"Had to do a crap ton of walking today since I was looking into something. Oh, and I got attacked by Sinker on the way back."

"....."

Kirisu didn't seem to have anything to say to that.

I walked right past him and headed for the bathroom, splashing the sweat off my face with lukewarm water. My left arm showed no sign of acting up, probably because I'd cooled off by now. Leaving the prosthetic keyed on for half a day exhausted the hell out of me, so I decided to take it off.

When I returned to the main room, Kirisu was mindlessly flicking through channels out of sheer boredom.

"Uh, did you hear me? I said I got attacked by Sinker."

"Heard you the first time. Like I said, I don't give a shit what happens to him."

He cut me off cleanly, but that was exactly what I had expected from the start. Besides, I wasn't trying to drag him into the mud because I wanted his company—I was just performing due diligence and keeping him up to date.

"I get where you're coming from. It's not like anything's gonna change. The guy's still gonna die even if nobody steps in, and with the cops setting up a task force, he'll probably get picked up by tomorrow."

Tomorrow was a bit of a stretch, but not by much, considering Ms. Mato would want a Possessed on the verge of self-destruction secured as soon as possible.

"...Hold on. What do you mean he's still gonna die?"

Hook, line, and sinker.

"Nothing major. It's just that his body is on the verge of collapse. That's how it goes for most cases of Agonist Disorder that are left unattended. Mutations may grant

functions far beyond human comprehension, but they also exact an immeasurable toll on any ordinary organism. Overusing it for any purpose other than survival will rot a person from the inside out, eventually leading to their death. In Sinker's case, he's been pushing himself faster than his body can keep pace with."

At a rate of one victim every two days, ending up as a broken piece of scrap—just as Hinomori had described—was no surprise.

"In my opinion, though, his mind's in even worse shape than his body. Most Agonist Disorder cases come hand-in-hand with some flavour of mental illness. Plenty develop it because of pre-existing issues, but there are also cases of Possessed whose mental illnesses only emerge after gaining a mutation. Sinker falls into the latter, with infantile regression and memory loss as his primary symptoms. Put simply, he's got a memory disorder he doesn't even realise exists."

Sinker hadn't had the faintest clue who I was until the actual game initiated. If anything, it wouldn't surprise me if he'd forgotten his own identity too. After all, it wasn't until several pitches in that Iguruma Kazumi's consciousness finally surfaced from Sinker's shell.

The problem was how many pitches it had taken for that to happen. Simply starting a match used to allow him to regain his lucidity instantly, yet now even one or two pitches wasn't enough to clear the fog. At this point, it was already terminal. Just as a drug addict builds a tolerance, he would eventually reach a bleak threshold where even slaughtering a batter by his own rigid rules would bring no satisfaction. Sinker would lose himself entirely to the mutation and become a phantom, condemned to reenact the same serial killings in a purgatorial loop.

"I'm sure you can guess, but absolutely nothing can be done at that stage. Iguruma Kazumi's gonna end up a full-fledged monster, unable to stop until someone more skilled than him finally puts him down."

Then again, a person had already crossed that line the moment they took a human life. No matter the process or reasoning behind it, the nature of a sin remains indisputable. It was of no importance to Sinker whether his homicidal tendencies were genuine or not. In the end, it was neither the culprit nor his victims, but only us bystanders who could ever be comforted by the answer to that question.

"....."

If that wasn't enough to wring a reaction out of him, then my words had no way of changing his resolve.

"Anyway, that's all I have to say on the matter. I promise I won't bring up this sentimental crap ever again. By the way, Kirisu... is it true that you'll accept just about any job, so long as it makes you money?"

"I guess," he replied haphazardly.

The fact that he didn't immediately deny it only made him seem all the more dependable.

"There's something I want you to get for me."

Kirisu was his own man, and I was mine. Sticking my nose into other people's business was a waste of time—after all, I had my own bills to cover.

"The fuck?"

Kirisu scowled heavily, finally turning his head to glare at the sheer absurdity of my request.

"A three-metre-diameter... what?"

"Can you get it for me? If possible, I'd appreciate it if you brought it directly here. Of course, I'll be glad to pay you once the job's done."

◆

With this, my role in this story finally drew to a close.

The devil's pitcher, Sinker, and the prodigious batter who had abandoned baseball for no discernible reason. A distant promise, left unrealised at the fork where their paths had split. Ishizue Arika was never meant to stand at the centre of this tale.

Now, it fell to the aces of both sides to bring this chapter to its conclusion.

All a casual spectator such as I could do now was fan the flames of their spirits and bear witness to their legendary showdown as it unfolded.

Obvious as it may be, both resolution and closure were things only the two of them could provide. However fiercely people like us pour our hearts into the players

on the field, in the end, we're always relegated to nothing more than spectators, quietly seated out in the grandstand.

8 / Sinker. (Bottom)

◆

Ishizue Arika had remarked that Sinker suffered from a memory disorder—one the pitcher himself remained entirely oblivious to. While the observation wasn't incorrect, it was, at best, a partial truth. After all, his memories had already fallen apart over half a year ago.

It was the summer of 2003.

With the district preliminaries concluded, a brief lull settled over the baseball club's activities. Iguruma Kazumi stood entirely alone on the mound, mindlessly repeating his pitching motions in the heat.

The devastating breaking balls he once commanded were no longer anywhere to be seen. His pitch couldn't even reach the catcher's mitt anymore, yet he silently continued repeating the same motions over and over again.

Several weeks had passed since he'd been subbed out from the finals due to his injury. Those ignorant of the truth assumed this routine was merely rehabilitation, while those privy regarded his performance as nothing more than an unsightly display.

The vicious assault perpetrated by his own teammates had been thoroughly covered up, almost certainly through the influence of Sekura Yumiya's parents.

The school administration flatly refused to go public with the incident, citing a concern that permanently scarring the disciplinary records of young boys would be educationally counterproductive. In the end, the administration brought the matter to a close by exempting Kazumi from his tuition fees until graduation.

The mere slap on the wrist his attackers received only served to inflate their sense of absolute impunity. But to Kazumi, the politics didn't matter. The only metric that held any weight in his world was whether his right arm would ever recover.

It wouldn't. The injury was a comminuted fracture, leaving him incapable of even navigating daily life properly, let alone returning to the field. So in order to shake away that reality, he sank himself deeper into practice.

His teammates scoffed openly at his obstinate persistence.

Day after day, as they witnessed his wretched pitches, the sight of their upperclassman clinging to the mound transformed into little more than a running locker-room joke. They ridiculed his foolish tenacity every single afternoon.

It was blindingly obvious to any observer that he would never again set foot on the field, and Kazumi himself understood that fact better than anyone else. The legendary sinker that had once struck icy terror into the hearts of countless batters had vanished without a trace. Even knowing he had fallen beneath the level of a grade schooler, he continued to reenact those same motions over and over again.

Iguruma Kazumi's mind had been possessed by obsession.

After all, he had a reason to push himself tirelessly—a dream he could not ever bring himself to relinquish.

December of that same year, in the dead of winter.

Iguruma Kazumi wrapped up his usual solitary drills, only for his juniors to saddle him with the entire clubroom cleanup before heading home.

The following day, he forced his way into Sekura Yumiya's classroom and attempted to assault the second-year captain. He was quickly restrained by a faculty member and dragged to the guidance office.

Deeming him of rather *unsound* mind, the school contacted the Shikura City police station and requested immediate intervention from the Juvenile Division. According to police intake logs recorded at the time, the boy was noted to be in a state of extreme psychological disorientation.

Three days later, Iguruma Kazumi was released from detention and served with an official notice of expulsion. He never returned home. Over the following months, his face was spotted intermittently among vagrant communities. Though the Juvenile Division classified him as a runaway, no officer had succeeded in locating or apprehending him from the moment the search was initiated.

Slightly more than half a year later, in July of 2004.

As June came to a close and summer began to bare its fangs, a juvenile believed to be Iguruma Kazumi was sighted among a homeless encampment.

However, the sighting remained permanently unconfirmed; in his deep delirium, the boy was entirely unable to produce his own name.

The more elderly members of his camp often tried to look after him out of worry. Anytime the old-timers gently pressed him about where he had come from, the boy would invariably offer the exact same hollow answer: I don't want to remember. However, every now and then, his vacant eyes would focus for a split second, and he would mutter a single phrase awkwardly, a pleading desperation written across his face: I want to become a pitcher.

Whenever those words surfaced, his companions could only hang their heads in heavy silence. After all, his right arm had become so grotesquely warped and scarred that even looking at the limb bordered on unbearable.

It all started when a fellow homeless took pity on him.

Having overheard the boy's ramblings about baseball, the man eventually led him to a nearby sandlot where children were engaged in a casual pickup game.

Needless to say, they were in no position to join themselves. All they were permitted to do was gaze from a distance.

Perhaps that sight struck some long-dormant chord within his psyche.

From that afternoon onward, the boy began watching the local SvS games in a daze, slowly recovering his mental faculties.

It was the gatherings amongst pitchers that interested him in particular. In this game, both pitchers and batters were split into separate factions, convening in segregated territories across the city. The pitchers held their gatherings deep within an industrial zone straddling Shikura Hills and Nouzu. It was the construction site for a multi-tenant complex—a project sprawling to the scale of a department store that was kept in a state of relative cleanliness. Construction had been delayed for some reason, making it an apt spot for pitching practice since it remained uninhabited several days a week.

He would sneak into the building unbeknownst to the pitchers, aimlessly watching over their gatherings.

Within his chest coiled a mingled ache of longing and nostalgia, accompanied by a searing pain.

Emotions, at their core, are nothing more than a sequence of electrical impulses. None could truly know what specific catalyst had spurred his shattered mind back into alignment—whatever vestiges of feeling had dredged his consciousness up from the depths of delirium remained a secret contained within him alone.

Gripping a ball within his mangled right arm, he squinted against the summertide's rays as he watched several other players his age practice. Between them lay an insurmountable gulf, as though he were merely watching a film through the fugue of a dream. However, that all changed one day.

Suddenly, a faraway memory surfaced from the depths of his mind.

It was a crisp morning at the start of summer, just like this one.

His recollection dragged him backward through time, forcing him to relive a day where he was trudging up a hill, a baseball clutched tightly in his small hand.

Ahead of him creaked an old-fashioned trolley piled with cargo, towed by a slender woman. Stacked atop it were iron frames and lengths of timber ceded from nearby factories. Such manual labour was clearly too harsh for a single woman, as the sight itself made painfully evident.

And yet, she continued to drag the trolley along at a crawl, her stamina evaporating with each agonising step. Though technically a hill, the incline might as well have been the face of a steep mountain. They stood dead-centre on an empty road devoid of cars. Rich, verdant summer greenery abutted the asphalt on one side, while the other was lined with apartments piled up like crude timber stacks.

The woman simply continued to pull, trudging over the crest of the hill in the desperate hope of selling the salvaged materials to a rival factory for the highest price she could wring out of them.

Such a sight was so pitiful that all it incited was ridicule. Resorting to these outdated means was the only way she knew to keep them alive.

Apparently, the younger version of himself had been helping her. Despite desperately wishing he was playing baseball, he trailed reluctantly behind the heavy wooden wheels. For all his desire to abandon the cargo and rush to the park, he knew full well that a single woman stood no chance of crossing the hill on her own. Swallowing his own displeasure, he continued to push the trolley alongside her, ball clutched in hand as a symbol of his dedication.

However, in the end, even the combined strength of the two of them wasn't enough to push the weight to the other side.

They ground to a halt midway up the road, unable to advance another inch. They were stranded like beggars on the roadside. There were no cars in the area, nor did they have any strength left to move the trolley. Even if a stranger had driven past, it was a certainty that no helping hand would ever be extended to people like them. He wanted to run away from it all, but the trolley was borrowed. Abandoning it was not an option.

It was a cruel, bitter summer.

Beneath the radiant sun that illuminated all things, they alone remained a dark blemish upon the landscape.

It was at this exact moment that he understood the true insignificance of his existence.

The blue sky looming overhead felt oppressively cold, even as the summer sun seared his scalp mercilessly.

He found himself on the verge of tears, unable to bear the weight of the suffering for another second.

He understood that his family lived in poverty. In fact, he had already accepted the reality that he had to labour alongside her just to survive.

But despite it all, he had finally reached his breaking point. The entire world laughed at them as they struggled along, wrapped in rags and dragging scraps across the road. Sorrow and misery tore at him, his urge to lash out at his own misfortune swelling.

But before that scream could escape his throat, he witnessed something that arrested his heart entirely.

"...Ah."

The consciousness he had once lost stirred back to life.

His family was poor, and that fact frustrated him more than any other.

That same thought, the one that had spurred him onward time and again, rose once more, rekindling his fading embers one final time.

"Well, well. You're that boy from back then, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

At last, he finally remembered the core of his being.

As the laughter of the other pitchers echoed from outside the window, a middle-aged man in a hat stepped into view. In a form bearing no resemblance to his last, the devil whispered to him.

"You long to become one of them, don't you? Should that be your desire, I can see it granted. After all, things didn't quite go as intended last time. Consider this my way of making things right."

In exchange for that which you hold dear, I shall grant your deepest desire.

"But are you certain? Unlike last time, I mean it. Should a batter best you, you will die. There is no turning back. Your life will end the moment your pitch gets sent back to you, and you won't be permitted to leave a game unfinished either. If you're truly certain about this—"

The devil paused, a placid smile on his lips.

"Is that dream of yours truly worth staking your life upon?"

Strength began to well within his withered right arm.

If it meant pitching again, it did not matter to Iguruma Kazumi what kind of being this man was.

Was his dream worth putting everything on the line for? Of course it was. He had already resolved to offer his life to baseball long ago.

The game had finally begun.

In the very next instant, the man set a devil upon his flesh. Having already developed a foundation due to his prior history, it took little time for a lesion to take root, and with it, the subsequent mutation.

At the same time, the entire right side of his body was incinerated, exacted as recompense for the years he had squandered neglecting it. This side effect of resuscitating his arm forced him to wear a hood, obscuring both his identity and his grotesque condition.

"Now, then. All that remains is to set the stage. Ah, that's right. You wished to become one of them, did you not?"

The man addressed the cluster of pitchers gathered at the construction site, while Kazumi watched from afar.

"Say, would you mind letting him join you? Just do that one little thing for me, and I'll grant any wish you so desire," he intoned with theatrical flair.

While several pitchers regarded him with open scepticism, Sekura Yumiya, perched atop a mound of rubble, heaved a slow breath.

Finding themselves oddly drawn to the man's words, the group eventually agreed to his request. Once more, Kazumi sank into recollection. Seven years ago, when the two of them had nodded to the man's words, had their friend looked upon them with that same frigid stare?

The other pitchers accepted the man into their group in jest, while Sekura Yumiya, driven by rivalry toward the hooded boy in the distance, struck a deal with the devil.

It took less than an hour for their abnormalities to develop.

Sekura Yumiya was a special case; the man noted that such seamless outcomes were unheard of in those not already afflicted with Agonist Disorder. Iguruma Kazumi was another exception, succeeding despite not being infected due to the pre-existing possession of his mind.

As cries of agony rang out, one of the pitchers lunged at his neighbour and sank his teeth into flesh. It was like a scene straight out of a zombie movie.

The two grabbed each other and fell to the ground, tearing at each other's flesh until they died. Madness spread as the same homicidal impulse ran amok, varying only slightly between individuals. Amidst the frenzy, Sekura Yumiya remained lucid, almost wishing he could surrender himself to the same madness. He alone retained consciousness within a waking nightmare. Within this realm, sanity was no different from sin. The easiest way to survive was to surpass the chaos with an even greater insanity.

But if delusion was the prerequisite for survival, Sekura was simply too exhausted. With tears brimming in his eyes, he disposed of the empty husks that pounced at him, their bodies still spilling blood. He lost himself to the frenzy after crushing the skulls of the first four with his ball, then seized a bat and lashed out at the remaining companions in a wild arc. As the bloodstained ace regained his sanity, a round of applause echoed in his vicinity.

"Magnificent. You eliminated the rest of the competition out of consideration for him, I see. It would seem I've unearthed another gem. You're worlds apart from these useless fools. It appears this town has, at last, crossed the point of no return."

Lauding him, the man proceeded to explain the same system Iguruma Kazumi knew all too well.

A single loss meant death. Running away meant death. For one who consorted with a devil, the only means of survival was victory. Unable to accept this truth, Sekura lunged at the man. In response, Iguruma Kazumi launched a 140-kilometre-per-hour breaking ball to dissuade him.

"Wh… what are you…"

Sekura's voice quavered. He turned and caught a glimpse of his fellow pitcher's eyes peeking out from under the hood.

"Shut the hell up. You don't deserve that phone if you aren't gonna pitch."

Sekura recognised the hooded pitcher, realising that his breaking ball had now regained its past glory. He feared for his life. He knew he would die if he stayed there any longer. So he fled.

He clutched his warped left arm tight and slammed his silver cell phone onto the floor as he ran. From the outset, the title of ace had been reserved only for the greatest pitcher on the field. Therefore, no one within this city was more befitting of that moniker than Kazumi.

"I'll handle the cleanup. You needn't concern yourself about anyone finding out. I own a factory nearby, which is more than enough to make everything disappear. Help yourself to whatever equipment you find here. You'll need it to see your revenge through, I trust?"

Upon hearing the word revenge, Iguruma Kazumi could only tilt his head in confusion. He had yet to fully recover his sense of self. In fact, it would only be when he gripped a ball as a pitcher that he would remember his own name.

"You must never forget: your trigger is rage."

As Kazumi started to walk away, that same unassuming voice called out to him from behind.

"Faded though it may be, a single glance will render it uncontrollable. One day, you will recall the truth. Your anger was never meant for any one man. After all, the true object of your fury is the nebulous, formless thing we call society."

Before leaving, Kazumi turned and asked the man for his name.

In response, he replied with a name even more commonplace than his own appearance.

It would be only a few days later that Iguruma Kazumi set his revenge in motion. He drifted around town, unable to recall who he was until the moment his eyes fell upon the person who had shattered his elbow—the exact moment Sinker was born.

◆

It was another day of stifling heat, measuring in at thirty-eight degrees.

Yet again, the creature awakened in the midst of a piercing cold.

Scattered across the ground lay the collection of cellphones it had gathered in the aftermath of his killings. Within that same thicket, it found itself caught between the midsummer sun and a ceaseless electronic hum.

One of the phones nearby was ringing. The creature attempted to silence it before realising it could scarcely draw breath, much less move its arm.

"A...ah..."

It dedicated every single function in his body to the sole task of gathering oxygen, a faint warmth finally seeping back after a string of ragged breaths.

With half its skin seared by the metamorphosis, most of its capacity for cutaneous respiration had been utterly lost. Put simply, the abnormal cold that plagued it was a result of its isolation from the atmosphere.

"Kh...gh..."

Cautiously continuing its breathing, it gauged the condition of its right arm's nerves. The limb refused to move, howling in protest from unending overexertion. At this rate, it wouldn't even be able to throw a single pitch anymore.

It was truly ironic; a mere week of rest would see it cured, yet it couldn't afford that brief period of respite. It wasn't that it didn't want to rest, but rather that it couldn't. The incessant ringing of the cell phone was the only thing tying its turbid consciousness together.

Sinker had seen a dream.

Those memories, now nearly twenty days old, felt as immediate as an hour ago. Its more recent memories were much more unsettling—it'd set its sights on the ninth batter, before being interrupted by a man in a black coat. After barely escaping with its life, it had passed out the instant it arrived at the park.

"Ha..."

That was of no importance right now. It steadied its breathing, forcing its thoughts into alignment.

There was something terribly, horribly wrong with its body. It had thought nothing could surpass yesterday's agony, yet in hindsight, that had been a miracle compared to its present state. Its fingers were unresponsive, as though they'd been frozen solid. It was cold. So unbearably cold. The sun hung close at hand, yet its

warmth basked everything else but it. The cheers it once heard had long since receded into silence. It sat in a stupor, unable to reconcile itself with the sheer cruelty of reality. It had only dozed for a brief moment, and yet that summer had already completely slipped through its grasp.

"What do you expect? It'll disappear if you don't play often enough."

The same explanation the man provided Sekura Yumiya on that day echoed, reverberating within its mind. It was the presence of a devil that kept them alive as Possessed, and without sustenance, both host and devil alike would wither and die.

The only means of feeding it was to stoke the flames of its obsession. Therefore, the only thing they could do was engross themselves in the same repeated murders.

"That's what I mean when I say failing to triumph means death. The heat of your dream will die out the moment you experience defeat."

The man was right—pure obsession was now the only fuel driving its body forward. The instant it lost that heat, its functions would cease for all of eternity.

"Ha... gah...!"

Finally, Sinker's right arm began to respond. Its undying fixation toward pitching lit a fire in the engine of its heart.

There was no need to worry. It still had one final target to bring down. As long as it still had a goal, a revenge to work toward, it would be able to convince itself to keep going.

"Only... one more left."

What would it do once its revenge was over? The shrill ringing clawed at its fraying mind. Would it continue pitching? Its only choice was to silence anyone who found out it was a Possessed. It understood full well that any game it played would inexorably culminate in its opponent's death. Even if it somehow survived today, its arm would inevitably give out by tomorrow. Was there any reason to keep pitching even then? Of course there was. If that was the only path left to it, then all it had to do

was continue killing batters. Its summer would know no end, not so long as baseball continued to exist. It couldn't afford to die here.

"Right... I..."

It had to continue pitching, no matter how much agony it brought. In spite of that, it could no longer remember why it felt that way.

"....."

Its body and mind had already collapsed long ago, derailing the course of its entire life.

It could no longer recall its own name, nor the desire that once drove it onward. The only certainty still left within it was the fact that it had to keep on pitching. For as long as it continued to breathe, that ruined right arm of it would go on killing.

It reached toward the incessantly ringing cell phone.

The screen displayed the date, August 18th, alongside the number of the golden fourth batter.

Within its mind, it heard one final siren signalling the start of the game.

▪

(8/18)

It was on the morning of this day that Iguruma Kazumi was identified as the culprit behind the recent string of murders.

After procuring the item Ishizue Arika had requested and seeing it delivered to the designated location, Kirisu Yaichirou strolled through the fields on the outskirts of Shikura City.

"....."

Kirisu trudged along absentmindedly, his eyes fixed on the ground beneath his feet. The thought drifted through his mind that it was only a matter of time now. But what, exactly, was only a matter of time?

Sinker's imminent arrest?

The dissolution of his long-standing bond to Iguruma Kazumi?

Or perhaps the belated final act of something that should have reached its curtain call long ago?

Unable to come up with an answer, Kirisu let his thoughts rattle like a marble in a tin can as he made his way toward the forest on the outskirts of the city.

He had visited this place once in the past with Ishizue Arika. Although every patch of woodland blurred together to him, the nearby bus stop served as a reliable waymarker. After locating the reservoir within its depths, he pulled open the door. A cavernous darkness stretched underground, giving off the impression that a mountain of corpses awaited somewhere below. Forcefully shutting down his survival instincts, Kirisu set foot inside. Total darkness was all that awaited after he shut the door, leaving him in a void completely isolated from the outside world. Ishizue Arika had to be insane to do this day after day without a care in the world. His friend always tried to play the part of a simple-minded fool, but no amount of feigned stupidity could smother the instinctive fear this place stirred within a person.

Kirisu drew a long breath, reflecting on how even this corridor's eeriness paled in comparison to what awaited farther ahead. The true horror lay deeper still, within the exquisite doll resting in that sun-dappled underground chamber. Kirisu couldn't

put the feelings that sight stirred within him into words; only that the creature's beauty left him profoundly ill at ease.

"You there?"

There was no reply. Even after he knocked, only silence greeted him. He vaguely recalled hearing once that no one would respond unless he entered of his own accord.

Steeling himself, he opened the door and abruptly stepped into a garden awash in light.

Caught amidst the blinding contrast, the beautiful figure languidly reclined upon a canopied bed, a prosthetic attached to each of his arms.

Above, the silhouette of a shark loomed across the ceiling, while the dog that was once there was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh? What brings you here, Kirisu?"

The room's master greeted him with a crooked smirk.

"Ain't here to see you. Arika told me to wait here. Said it was something about work."

"Ah, I see. So that's it. He really is such a fool. Why is it that he only ever gets truly committed when it comes to other people?"

A smile far too beautiful to comfortably behold spread across his face as he posed that question.

Ishizue Arika's reason for summoning Kirisu here seemed immediately apparent to him.

"It's almost like the term 'beyond saving' was coined specifically for his sake. Even after being so thoroughly stained on the inside, he's still capable of cherishing beautiful things. Ah, he's simply delicious. Don't you think that's pitiful? Doesn't it just wanna make you mess him up?"

"....."

Kirisu couldn't make heads or tails of what he was trying to say.

Even so, he sensed a faint sort of kinship between the boy and Ishizue Arika. The things they saw, and the things they believed in differed entirely, yet the emotions that lied at their core felt rather alike.

Shaking off those strange misgivings, Kirisu dropped onto the sofa and deliberately tore his eyes away from the bed. Not out of rudeness, mind you; after all, to Kirisu, the silhouette on the bed was simply a repulsive creature that didn't deserve to be looked at.

"Hey, what's the deal with that left arm?"

Unable to stomach the oppressive silence any longer, he tossed out a frivolous question.

Ishizue Arika had his prosthetic on last night, and he hadn't come by to return it since. If that was the case, then whatever Kaie currently had attached to his left shoulder had to be something else entirely.

"Just a spare. I had my right leg, Sorrow, split part of itself off for me. It's purely cosmetic, anyway. All of my useful limbs are currently out on loan."

"....."

To Kirisu, Karyou Kaie's words might as well have been lifted straight from a storybook. Even if he recognised the language behind them, they simply slipped right through his mind.

There was no point in any conversation here.

The silence was unbearable, yet any attempt at genuine dialogue felt somehow even worse. Regretting that he had even come, Kirisu shot up from the sofa.

Though he had no intention of outright asking for help, some faint part of him had still entertained the hope that Kaie might decide to save Sinker on a whim. Now, he could only curse himself for even expecting anything. In the first place, he had already sworn he wouldn't be part of this mess anymore.

"You were the genius slugger, weren't you?" Before he could leave, words cinched around his throat like a chain.

"How the hell d'you know that? Arika told you?"

"Nope. I'd heard the rumours long ago, though I only learned your name recently. Or rather, after Arika mentioned that suspicious hoodlum I'd just met happened to be the man in question. He had the same sour look on his face as always, but he sounded really proud while talking about you," the silhouette mused, his angelical features breaking into a beaming smile.

"……"

This time it was a more human smile, lacking the uncanny quality it possessed earlier.

"Screw that guy. Where does he get off calling me a shady hoodlum?"

As the cold sweat coating his back gradually subsided, Kirisu grumbled in dissatisfaction at his friend's remarks.

"But what about now? Have you given up on baseball already?"

"I have. That crap's ancient history now. Haven't stepped into the box in forever. What's with the sudden interest anyway? What does me being a batter have to do with you?"

"Nothing at all. It's just that something's been bothering me all this time. I've been meaning to ask you this ever since we first met."

Kirisu had heard that exact preamble countless times before. Whenever people came face-to-face with the genius slugger, there was always one question they all wanted answered: Why had he quit baseball? He hung his head, already bracing himself for the all-too-familiar question.

"Tell me, why is it that you throw up whenever you hit a home run?"

"……"

Kirisu jerked his head up, the question gouging straight into the deepest parts of him.

Kaie's pearly pupils bored through his gaze, bleeding the strength from his legs and sending him staggering back onto the sofa. No, it wasn't because of Kaie's eyes that his consciousness grew faint. It was the fact that the question itself exposed a sin Kirisu Yaichirou had never once managed to look away from.

"Why he continued baseball, and why you gave up on it. At a glance, they seem unrelated, but once one side comes to the forefront, a certain truth begins surfacing from the other. Well? I'm not particularly inclined toward this myself, but perhaps your story might help me find a way to save Iguruma Kazumi. Or are you too much of

a coward to admit to murder, despite leaving behind a trail of smashed skulls in your wake?"

"....."

Kirisu felt the seams of his sanity beginning to split apart. With nothing more than a handful of words, Kaie had reached in and crumpled the heart of the man once known as Kirisu Yaichirou between his hands.

He'd already killed dozens of victims in the past. That was a delusion unknown to anyone but Kirisu Yaichirou, yet the silhouette before his eyes delighted in it as though it were his own.

"That's why you came here in the first place, isn't it? There's no other reason you'd have willingly stepped into a place like this. Relax. I'm willing to turn the other cheek to your past impudence. After all, no one understands better than you how deeply your carelessness has wounded those around you. Now, shall we begin? I can hardly wait any longer. The reason Iguruma Kazumi became so obsessed with being a pitcher, and the reason Kirisu Yaichirou abandoned baseball altogether. Different as they may be, the root from which they sprang was one and the same. I promise you, that's all I want to know. I have no interest whatsoever in exposing your sins to the world, nor any intention of condemning you for them. All I desire to hear is your past."

"I..."

Was it the burden of concealing that sin for so many years? Or was it the certainty that, before this devil, no confession could possibly become a sin in the first place?

Seduced by those words, the man slowly began to recount, to confess, the final chapter of his youth.

◇

It was in the fall of his first year that Kirisu Yaichirou first crossed paths with Nishino Harusumi.

He had already chosen to devote himself to baseball, but that wasn't the only reason others looked up to him.

Having spent his middle-school years running with delinquents while treating baseball as a mere hobby, he maintained nearly every connection he forged even after graduation. While baseball was his true love, he had no intention of demeaning the time he spent with his other friends.

As fate would have it, one of his upperclassmen happened to be under Nishino Harusumi's care. Ever since the day that upperclassman introduced them, Nishino had set his sights on Kirisu as a prospect worth cultivating. While he hated Kirisu's guts, he also recognised that the boy's natural charisma and exceptional talents could be put to good use. Because of this, he desired to stamp his claim on Kirisu as early as he could.

Though Kirisu still spent most of that time screwing around with his friends, he made certain never to step over a particular line. Nishino's group approached him time and time again, yet Kirisu always brushed them off by using the baseball club as an excuse.

It was at the start of his second year that this balance crumbled—the day he met Aoyagi Masashi, the man Nishino Harusumi had once called his elder brother.

The Nanase Family was a subsidiary of the Shouda Clan, an organised crime syndicate that ruled over Shikura City.

Strictly speaking, the Family itself consisted only of the patriarch and his sworn subordinates, yet once one counted the street punks occupying the organisation's lowest strata, their numbers topped four hundred.

Though Nishino occupied a fairly influential seat within the Family, he had never quite managed to fit in amongst his peers. Around a decade ago, he voluntarily took charge of the Family's brothels. With the coming of the nineties, however, the sex industry's profits had sharply declined, leaving it with the reputation of being exhausting work for comparatively low returns. Aside from running the brothels, one also had to peddle illegal tapes on the side, making it the sort of grunt work usually saddled by third-rate yakuza.

At this period of time, loan-sharking and real estate were still effortless goldmines for crime syndicates. In opposition to Nishino, Aoyagi was a quintessential yakuza who ran a lending corporation that had contributed to the family for years.

Needless to say, anyone could tell that their relationship was beyond salvaging. Aoyagi treated his younger brother as an object of disdain, while Nishino believed his elder brother to be an unreasonable fool.

To make matters worse for Nishino, the Nanase Family was a relatively old-fashioned crime syndicate. Earning money was expected, but upholding the yakuza code was far more important to them. They extolled violence above all else, and no one embodied that creed more thoroughly than Aoyagi Masashi.

However, that philosophy was already beginning to rot away. With the changing times, the yakuza were forced to adapt to the present rather than cling to antiquated ideals. At this point, it was only a matter of time before Nishino's influence caught up with Aoyagi's.

If Nishino represented the modern yakuza, then Aoyagi was a relic soon to be left behind by the era. The days where they could roam the streets and strike fear into people's hearts were over. Despite the fact that every Family within Japan had begun to shift, Aoyagi didn't feel the slightest need to change his stance.

To put it frankly, one could even say that Aoyagi Masashi was a man possessed by the idea of violence. To him, the brutality inflicted during the process had always mattered far more than whatever profits accrued afterward.

Instead of doing it for the money, he ran an illegal lending corporation for the sake of tormenting his debtors. He deliberately targeted people with no realistic means of repayment, transforming their lives into a living hell and leaving scores of corpses in his wake.

While Nishino was undeniably a piece of human scum, he possessed much more of a conscience than his elder brother ever did. Anticipating the changing tide, Nishino pounced on the opportunity, recognising that a streamlined network would drastically reduce operating costs and transform the brothels into a stable source of revenue.

To a man like Aoyagi, born into this world only to inflict violence, Nishino's existence was no more than an eyesore. Aoyagi had resented his wiles since the day they met, kicking him to the ground and humiliating him more times than Nishino could

count. Unfortunately for Nishino, his steadily expanding influence within the Family only inflamed matters further.

At this point, a single problem haunted Nishino constantly. Driven to the brink of death several times in the past, he knew a single year would be enough to usurp Aoyagi. Yet, there was no guarantee he had that much time left.

Despite their worsening relations, however, Aoyagi took a liking to Nishino's newest underling: Kirisu Yaichirou. As someone who lived and breathed violence, Aoyagi may well have sensed a certain kinship in Kirisu's strength and bearing.

Though Aoyagi offered to take him under his wing several times, Kirisu stubbornly rebuffed him each time. He may not have possessed even a single shred of humanity, but Aoyagi was capable of showing respect to those he deemed worthy. Agreeing to Kirisu's request to wait until graduation, he showed him around his workplace several times, seemingly as a display of favour. Within that office, which Aoyagi considered the rightful domain of a true yakuza, Kirisu came across a familiar woman.

She was wan and frail, her eyes speaking of an exhaustion toward life itself. In the next moment, his future superior gleefully declared her a mere offering to his violence.

If Kirisu Yaichirou had to mark a watershed within his life, then this was undoubtedly the moment everything changed forever.

Aoyagi had already undergone an irreversible collapse as a human being.

The only meaning he could derive from life was trampling on the weak and thrusting them into despair.

The woman had borrowed money from a subsidiary of the Nanase Family, barely managing to keep up with her payments each month. At this point in time, Kirisu was in his second year. She worked tirelessly in order to repay her debt, refusing to lean on anyone for help. Her son had only recently begun to make a name for himself, and the last thing she wanted was for her circumstances to become a burden on him.

Though she was clearly struggling, she would've managed to clear the debt within half a year if she maintained her current pace. Originally, the Nanase Family had projected nearly five years' worth of interest from her account, but they had no particular objection to her advance repayments. In the end, all it meant was that their profits stopped at one year.

However, Aoyagi rejected that fact viscerally. It wasn't the loss of profit that infuriated him. It was the fact that a weakling who was supposed to spend the rest of her life wallowing in misery had dared to claw her way back out of the pit. That aggravated him like nothing else, spurring him into a frenzied rage.

"The fuck did ya just say to me?! Cut the crap, you goddamn bitch! Ya seriously think a piece of shit like you deserves to live like a normal human being?!"

He kicked her to the ground, driving his fist into her face and tightening his grip around her neck.

"Who the fuck gave ya the right to dream of a better life?! I don't give a rat's ass about your son. What, you think he's a big shot now or some shit? You think he's better than me?! I'm asking you if that brat that crawled outta your useless womb is supposed to be worth more than me, goddamnit! Answer me!"

The sight of her painstaking effort caused the warped machinery of Aoyagi's mind to spin violently out of control.

Because of that, he swore not only to ruin the woman's life but her son's along with it.

No words could properly capture the state of mind Kirisu Yaichirou found himself in at that moment.

Every coherent thought had vanished from his head. His vision bleached white, as though his brain had ruptured.

"I'll fuck your son up so badly that he'll never hold a damn ball again!"

Aoyagi's delirious shrieks of ecstasy echoed through Kirisu's hollowed-out cranium.

Back in childhood, Kirisu had made a promise—one he had carried with him all these years.

He had a friend whose life he had ruined through his own carelessness. Though that friend had long since told him to forget about it, Kirisu continued to cling to the vow.

He quickly made up his mind.

Two days later, he stormed into Aoyagi Masashi's office alone, prepared to do whatever it took.

He would lose everything. He would betray everything he loved. Even then, there remained one thing he simply could not afford to relinquish—something he had to protect with his life.

However, he made two fatal miscalculations.

The first was failing to predict Nishino Harusumi's intrusion after everything was over.

The second was vastly underestimating the soundness of his own memory.

Kirisu never learned what ultimately became of Aoyagi Masashi. He was still breathing when Nishino arrived and offered to take care of the rest.

Nishino simply laughed it off, remarking that there was no room left for Aoyagi to survive either. Since then, the two of them buried that secret between themselves alone.

Kirisu couldn't understand. Why had Nishino appeared at an office where Aoyagi was supposed to be alone that night? Why had he covered for Kirisu? Even if their interests happened to align, there was no reason for him to willingly dirty his hands as an accessory to murder. Unless, of course, he had gone there with the exact same objective in mind. If Kirisu's decision had come a single day later, or even a single hour later, then perhaps—

Regardless, there was no changing the past. On Nishino's orders, Kirisu resolved to devote the remainder of his high-school life to baseball.

However, a few days later, he began to notice a strange phenomenon.

During an ordinary practice match, Kirisu hit a home run and witnessed a sight that made him doubt his eyes.

What was once a baseball had become a human head—resentful eyes drilling through him—with the same sickening *squelch* from that night ringing in his ears the moment it made impact.

Splat.

He remembered the sensation of caving in a man's skull.

The wet spray of spinal fluid gunking to his cheeks.

The next thing he knew, Kirisu was heaving within the batter's box.

The ball traced a beautiful parabola beyond the stadium walls, earning him a thunderous round of cheers from the crowd. He gazed at Aoyagi's broken skull on the floor, his teammates shouting praises from the dugout all the while. And beneath that immaculate blue sky, he stood there alone, gripping a bat stained red in blood.

Unable to bear the sinfulness of the sight, Kirisu Yaichirou passed out.

From then on, the same hallucination tormented him every single time he hit a home run. A mountain of corpses began to pile up. With each successive homer, he sank deeper and deeper into the bloodlust festering inside his delusions.

With this, baseball became something he could never take pride in or enjoy ever again. That was his punishment for desecrating the thing he loved most. Accepting his fate, Kirisu decided to put his bat down for good after graduating high school.

Although he wanted nothing more than to walk away immediately, there still remained a promise he had yet to fulfill. Even knowing that honouring it would only sear the stigma of his sin deeper into his soul, he couldn't bring himself to abandon the partner waiting for him. For the sake of his friend, he would continue to defile baseball until his final summer came to an end.

That was Kirisu Yaichirou's curtain call—the untold finale to the story of the genius slugger known to no one but himself.

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Thus did his solemn confession come to a close.

No one besides himself could possibly comprehend the weight of those feelings. Needless to say, that held all the more true for Karyou Kaie, a creature incapable of possessing any proper human emotion to begin with. All that remained now was an irrevocable conclusion.

He hadn't run away from baseball; he had simply put an end to it. Locking away every last remnant of regret and joy, the batter who possessed a brilliance unlike any other quietly lowered the curtain on his own story.

"Baseball's always been about fun to me. Don't even know why, it just felt right."

To those never blessed in the same manner, such a belief bordered on arrogance.

"But ever since that day, I stopped being able to see it that way."

At the same time, his creed was much too pure for them to comprehend.

This was the silent conclusion of the man who never found meaning in victory to begin with.

Kirisu Yaichirou picked up the baseball bat for his own enjoyment, upheld their promise for his own sake, and ultimately cast aside the bat for that very same reason. That, and that alone, was all that mattered.

"I see. Does Iguruma Kazumi know?"

"Only Nishino and I know about Aoyagi. This secret's gonna follow us to our graves. You ain't a proper human being, so you don't count. Still, can't be worse than shouting 'bout my donkey ears to a hole, right?"

"Oh, come on. That's not fair. I can't go blabbing about it when you put it like that," Kaie said, a gentle smile surfacing across his face.

Apparently, he had taken a liking to Kirisu's frantic analogy.

"Well? Was my worthless little story any help at all?"

Kaie had suggested that by understanding Kirisu's traumatic past—his reason for abandoning the sport—he might uncover some means of saving Iguruma Kazumi.

"Indeed it did. Thank you for opening up. I still can't say anything with certainty, but I do have a hypothesis worth entertaining now. Though, please don't misunderstand me. What interests me is the past the two of you share, not his salvation. I may offer my perspective, but you're the one who'll have to act upon it."

"....."

Kaie had mentioned he had no intention of exposing Kirisu's sin. He was akin to an enchanting parrot, listening to Kirisu's words only to return them to him.

"I don't care. Just give me whatever you've got."

"If you insist. Honestly, I assumed he already knew why you gave up on baseball all along. But according to you, that's impossible. Assuming that to be the case, then what reason is there for him to hold himself back from you?"

"I don't get it. What are you trying to say?"

"I'm referring to the reason he's still pitching. If you've already accepted the death of your dream, then why is he incapable of the same?"

"That's..."

Because Iguruma Kazumi still hadn't settled the score with Kirisu Yaichirou. The promise exchanged between them that day still shackled him even now.

"I thought the same when I first learned of your past together. But if that's truly all there is to it, then why hasn't he challenged you yet? There should be no reason whatsoever for him to spare you if he's ignorant of the truth. And if he understands the two of you will never again face each other on the big stage, then all the more reason to settle things before it's too late."

"That's... because I'm not a part of SvS."

"You don't actually believe that, do you? It's a serial killer we're talking about here. It makes no sense for him to restrain himself over something as trivial as that. Which means there's yet another reason he's still going—another reason he continues to play. I won't deny that you're part of it, but at best, you should amount to nothing more than a faint hope. That childhood promise of yours? Please. This isn't a fairy tale. Something far more sinister gave rise to Sinker's birth, and deep down, you've always known what it was, haven't you?"

"....."

Kaie was right—he'd known Iguruma Kazumi's true motive from the start. Yet he had consciously chosen to avert his gaze, understanding full well the futility behind Sinker's actions.

"Indeed. Sinker was born from a desire he simply couldn't bring himself to cast off. But that something is already out of his reach. From what I've heard, the crimes he's committing now strike me as nothing more than shoddy attempts to escape that reality. Once he lost his original purpose, he fled into an entirely different motive. Sweeping it under the rug, you might say. If Arika were here, I'm certain he'd understand immediately. Possessed love to come up with their own motives, leaving the reality buried deep within them. By clothing themselves in a flimsy veil of justification, they avert their eyes from inconvenient truths and preserve their own fragile righteousness."

There was nothing particularly unusual about that. The only distinction was that their escapism had strayed into the realm of amnesia.

"Inconvenient… truths?"

He had heard similar words recently.

What was it that Ishizue Arika had said when he offhandedly reported his run-in with Sinker? A fragmented loss of memory. A form of memory disorder convenient only to himself.

"No…"

He shook his head in denial, unable to fully reject the realisation that had begun to take root. If that were true, there was something else he would be forced to confront as well.

Impossible as it was, what if Iguruma Kazumi didn't actually understand the events of that wintry December?

"That can't be…"

Kirisu's expression froze over. What left him petrified was not the truth itself, but the conclusion Kaie's hypothesis forced upon him. It was a labyrinth with no exit. Were that truly the case, then Iguruma Kazumi was already beyond salvation. Sinker would become a monster solely capable of pitching—solely capable of killing until the very moment he crumbled away.

"It's all pointless. Everything he's done has been for nothing. Can he still be stopped? If we tell him the truth, then..."

"No words can reach a Possessed, Kirisu. If you want to stop him, then you'll have to do it within the confines of his own rules. A batter who strikes out dies, and likewise, a pitcher who surrenders a hit meets the same fate. Those have been the rules from the start, haven't they?"

His admonishing voice resembled a serenade, tickling directly into Kirisu's eardrums. At this point, Kirisu even lost sight of the fact that he was still seated upon the sofa.

"As I already mentioned, I have no intention of saving him. The only thing that matters here is what you yourself wish to do. If you still insist on me lending you a hand for his sake, and not yours, then..."

There was no longer any saving him. The devil that declared so countless times whispered into his soul.

"It's simple, really. All you need to do is alter your perspective. What is it that you can do for him? If his end is already set in stone regardless, then what can you possibly do to make those final moments of his as tranquil as they can be? Is that not the sort of human salvation you wish to grant him?"

"Th-That's..."

He stood motionless, as if his soul had been swallowed up whole. This question had tormented him for days now.

"There's only one answer here. You just have to swing that bat of yours."

How much easier would everything become if he simply cast aside his futile convictions and stepped back into the batter's box?

"Just like that, you can put him out of his misery. No matter what happens, he only has a few days left. Besides, it's not like you're going to kill him yourself. One single swing, and that's all it'll take. It may not be enough to arrive at Iguruma Kazumi's truth, but it'll be a proper send-off for Sinker, as far as endings for a killer go."

However, what would happen if Kirisu failed? What sort of disenchantment awaited his friend if he proved incapable of so much as grazing the ball?

"No, I can't do that. This isn't the baseball I wanted to play..."

Kirisu Yaichirou refused to stake his life upon baseball.

It wasn't that he couldn't, but that he wouldn't. Risking everything he had was not the baseball he loved—it was no more than a betrayal of it. However, if he'd been committing that betrayal all along, then—

"Exactly. That's the one absurdly simple thing that's been shackling you this entire time."

The devil in front of him chuckled, his ungodly beauty all but burning itself into Kirisu's retinas.

Crush whatever pitch I throw with everything you've got.

In the midst of his flickering vision, the same voice he heard that day crept into his ears. If he had just done as Iguruma Kazumi had begged for, then this would've never happened—he would have never had to deal with Sinker's reemergence.

"If you're so sure you can't do it, would you like me to lend you a hand? Just offer up your elbow and eye, and..."

A honeyed voice of temptation caressed him.

It's time to put an end to his dream.

For that sake, he would betray everything he loved once more. A second chance at salvation would never descend upon either of them, but at the very least, he could finally bring this tragedy to its conclusion.

"Right, I..."

Kirisu Yaichirou's throat trembled faintly.

With clouded eyes, he tried to affirm the devil's words he had once shook away so effortlessly.

"Snap out of it already, dumbass. Where the hell'd the easygoing Kirisu we all know and love go? Besides, ending things like that ain't gonna solve anything."

That was, until the appearance of his friend awakened him from his trance.

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"Alright, get away. This kid's the real deal, unlike that shady, self-styled devil of yours. He'll suck you to the marrow if you give him even the slightest opening."

With a brusque gait, Ishizue Arika made his way into the underground room. Hearing his voice allowed Kirisu to breathe once more, while the silhouette on the bed pouted in dissatisfaction.

"What horrible timing. For some reason, fortune's always on your side when it matters most. Seriously, all I wanted to do was grant Kirisu's dream," Karyou Kaie grumbled with a sullen edge.

The sun's rays sifting through the ceiling were murkier now, yet the suffocating pall that had filled the room moments before had lifted completely.

"The hell? 'His dream?' What're you even on about?"

"This is my score to settle. You'd do well to mind your own business." Kirisu lashed out, hoping to paper over his earlier blunder.

"Whatever. I couldn't care less about all that, to be completely honest. Still, can't you guys save your tea party for later? I've got something you two might wanna hear."

The job Arika had accepted in Kaie's stead hadn't been completed in earnest. His task was to apprehend Sekura Yumiya and perform the exorcism himself if it came to that. Furthermore, he was to ensure that any third party responsible for Sekura's possession would be punished. The client sternly insisted that neither matter was to be handed over to the law, settled instead by Karyou Kaie's own hand.

At least, that was what he gathered from his notes. Exorcising Sinker, in short, was non-negotiable.

"So, you want me to help out with that exorcism crap?"

"Pretty much. I'm screwed if I don't win, so I'd be much obliged if you helped me out as a decoy."

Kirisu couldn't help but be a bit perplexed at his sudden proposal. Was he supposed to be exasperated or angry? Had it been anyone but Arika who sprung that request on him, he would have beaten them up on the spot.

"I asked Ms. Mato to negotiate with the client, but this is how much they're offering if we leave things to the police. On the other hand, if we do the exorcism ourselves, we get this much. Whaddya think, Kirisu? Just about enough to make it worth risking our lives, right?"

After putting one finger up, he proceeded to take his prosthetic and raise all ten of them. It wasn't about the money for Kirisu, but even he had to doubt his eyes for a moment.

"Ten? Wait, each one's a hundred, right?"

"You bet. And it'll be an even split. Oh, you won't need to match his pitch or anything. I'll sneak up on Sinker while the game has his eyes and let this little puppy handle the rest."

Speaking in a carefree tone, he gave his left arm a casual pat. After all this time, Kirisu finally understood what lay at the heart of his friend's intentions.

He didn't have to swing his bat.

Nor did he have to put an end to this with his own hands.

From the beginning to the end, Arika never once asked Kirisu to settle the score with Sinker.

If their promise was left unfulfilled, then that was fine in its own right.

Dreams were meant to end without ever coming true. Such an end was befitting an ordinary man who carried no cause for shame or regret.

"....."

That was Ishizue Arika's conclusion. However, it led Kirisu to a painful realisation. To his friend, the sight of someone actually given the chance to see their dream through to the end must've burned with an almost unbearable brightness.

"Listen up, Ishizue-sen—"

"I told you not to call me that. I ain't gonna force you to come to terms with your past or anything. In the first place, having to help you with all that's a pain in the ass. Work's something we do in order to survive. This is just a business proposition, Kirisu. You sheltered Sekura Yumiya for cash, even knowing damn well he was responsible for ruining Iguruma's life. So can you really afford to pass up an offer this fat?"

To live was to continue moving forward.

Instead of picking up his bat to exorcise ghosts of the past, he would be doing it in order to swat away the obstacles blocking his path toward the future.

In the end, he could only wonder in frustration whether the past or present was more important to him.

"……"

Suddenly, he recalled a certain phrase Nishino Harusumi used to repeat ad nauseam.

It was his catchphrase, a false show of bravado from his elder brother who was unfit to be a yakuza.

Beside him stood the friend who he once deemed straightforward, yet now considered the most bizarre and inscrutable person alive.

"Damn it all. I handed this off to you 'cause I'd already given up; I made my peace with the idea that Sinker was out of my reach. That's why I threw in the towel and got you wrapped up in desperation. But for some goddamn reason, though, you always find a way to tie things up like this."

"Never mind, we're splitting the money seventy-thirty. You really oughta keep that crap to yourself, y'know? Even if you mean it. So? What's it gonna be? You doing this or not?"

Arika smiled silently, and Kirisu Yaichirou answered with the flat tone of resignation.

"You have yourself a deal. That's a good point you made, Arika. Anybody dumb enough to mess with my turf deserves to get the shit kicked outta them."

With that, he finally accepted the signal heralding the start of his game.

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Extraneous as the rest may've been, that was not the end of their conversation.

"Mind giving me a moment, you two? Forgive me for barging in at such a pivotal juncture—no, actually, I can't say I feel all that apologetic. If anything, I'd say I've earned the right to be irritated here. This is so odd; I've never felt like this before."

Karyou Kaie cocked his head quizzically as he interjected.

"Anyway, setting their storied past aside, are we even sure Kirisu can put up a fight? He's already at a handicap against Sinker, and he hasn't played baseball in forever. How do we know he won't die in three pitches?"

"That's on him. The only one capable of dragging those instincts back outta him is himself. Honestly, we'd be lucky if he lasted three pitches. All I'm after is a chance to sneak up on Sinker safely."

"It's hopeless."

"Wow, you sure are frank. You oughta keep shit to yourself, even if they're your honest feelings."

While Kirisu's eyes had gone to half-mast, Kaie's mood appeared to have bounced back.

"You two make for quite the act. Still, there's no need to worry about his skills with the bat declining. Ain't that right, Kirisu?"

"What are you saying? He quit playing baseball long ago."

"Quit the game, sure. But one look at his body's enough to notice the ungodly number of practice swings he's been puttin' in day after day. He may not have stepped into the box since our high school days, but he never once said he'd put the bat down for good. Kirisu isn't gonna hold back now that he's stepped up, I'm sure of that. It's just the sorta freak this guy is."

"Heh, that's the last thing I wanna hear from some jackass who hits a line drive after calling his own strikeout and charges headlong into a match after swearin' it off."

"Yeah, yeah. Time is of the essence here, folks. Let's get moving right away, Kirisu. No need to sit around any longer. We gotta wrap this up before that witch corners him first."

"Well, yeah, but how exactly're we supposed to lure him out? If we don't wait until nighttime..."

"You can have this back. My game with Sinker was interrupted, which means I haven't struck out yet. We still have one last right to challenge him."

Saying that, Ishizue Arika took out a golden cell phone.

Every last piece had already been arranged beforehand.

Despite his aggravation at how his friend reserved that level of thoroughness exclusively for other people's affairs, Kirisu Yaichirou felt the corners of his mouth betray him.

"Before that, there're a few conditions I wanna make crystal clear. First, I'll give it everything I have, so you sit back until the game's over."

"Fine by me. I'll be ready to sneak up on him at a moment's notice if you strike out."

"This next one's the last. I won't ask you to spare his life, but if he's still alive at the end of everything, can you press him into turning himself in? Agree to both of those, and I'll put my life on the line for your stupid game of baseball."

"I mean, I don't mind. The first one's no problem, but I don't know if Sinker will agree to the second."

"Dude, I'm just an ordinary guy here. Remember that I'm dealing with a goddamn two-stage sinker. Don't you think I've earned at least this much of a handicap?"

Arika nodded in reluctant acceptance of his proposal.

Bringing Sinker around would be no easy feat, but this was, as Kirisu stated, a clash between an ordinary human and a Possessed. If he leveraged that, there was still room to negotiate.

"What a strange world we live in. Who'd have thought my knack for communicating with the Possessed would turn out to be so useful?"

Arika briefly entertained the idea of thanking Touma Mato, then thought better of it, letting the gratitude live within his words as he turned to face Kirisu.

"You have yourself a deal, Slugger. I've put together as level a playing field as I could manage. Man, I sure am glad my efforts didn't go to waste."

"The hell are you on about? You put together what?"

Kirisu and Kaie looked at him with matching gazes of confusion. In response—

"Like I said, a stadium capable of neutralising his two-stage sinker. Wait, did I skip that part?"

Ishizue Arika returned their stares with an even more puzzled look than his two companions had.

9 / Sinker vs. Slugger

▪

It was a summer of absolute, blistering heat.

Just past noon, the temperature had already crested thirty-eight degrees. The city lay smothered beneath a blinding haze, the very asphalt warping under the strain.

In stark contrast to the frying pan of the earth beneath it, the sky stretched on in an endless, immaculate blue, its towering cumulonimbus clouds singing a high-handed ode to the season.

August 18. Clear skies. An oppressively perfect day for baseball.

A construction site on the outskirts of Nouzu's industrial sector was to be their final stadium.

"His two-stage sinker is invincible once it triggers. In other words, the best we can do is to keep it from ever getting to the second break."

Such was Ishizue Arika's conclusion, and one Kirisu had long since arrived at himself. The liability lay in their complete lack of a means to seal away that second break.

"Yeah. And since we've got no way of stopping the second break, we've gotta prevent it from breaking altogether."

Declaring that this would level the odds, Arika led Kirisu not around the perimeter of the construction site, but directly inside. Into a sprawling, interminable corridor roughly three metres wide, tracing the outer shell of the commercial lot.

"Wha… have you lost your mind?!"

Kirisu's loss for words was entirely justified.

Before him lay an L-shaped corridor. Placed dead in the centre of the right angle was a colossal mirror, spanning nearly three metres in diameter. Adjusted to reflect the

blind stretch of the hallway, the glass offered a clear view of a makeshift pitcher's mound.

This was Ishizue Arika's bespoke arena. An L-shaped stadium that forcibly segregated pitcher and batter across a blind corner.

"As you can see, there's 'bout eight metres from the corner to the pitcher's mound on the right. And about ten to this batter's box up top. It's bent at a right angle, but it's still a proper stadium. This oughta be enough to hold his first break in check, wouldn't you say?"

If the second stage could not be sealed, they would simply dictate the first. In other words—they would force the pitch's initial trajectory into a fixed absolute.

To even participate in this arena, Sinker was bound by an inescapable constraint: he had to break the ball to the right on its first stage. This wasn't a matter of throwing strikes, balls, or beanballs. If he didn't snap his pitch into a sharp rightward curve perfectly timed with the corner, the ball would shatter against the concrete long before it ever reached the batter's box.

Needless to say, such a thing could never be called baseball. That the pitcher and batter could see one another was the most fundamental condition of the sport, which was why Ishizue Arika had pressed a mirror into service. Their sense of direction and distance would suffer from his makeshift workaround; nevertheless, he was confident they could recalibrate within a pitch or two.

Batter and pitcher, locking eyes solely through a reflection, waging war across an impenetrable barrier. An utterly pathological dynamic.

That was the stadium Ishizue Arika had prepared for the duel between an ordinary human and a Possessed—a misshapen diamond only made possible by Sinker's ability to alter the ball's course with his blood.

"I take that back. You're an absolute fuckin' lunatic."

Even so, this was going to be interesting.

Kirisu fished out his bat. He threaded his fingers into his gloves and rolled his shoulders to bleed the tension from his joints. He sharpened his focus, claiming this dilapidated, factory-like corridor as his personal domain.

The passage boasted more than enough clearance. The outward-facing wall was punctuated by massive windows, filtering in enough ambient light to track the ball. It was an utterly preposterous arena, yet it satisfied the bare minimum criteria for a match.

The facility was completely abandoned, a total void of human life. The city was distant enough that no outside noise could bleed in and disrupt his concentration.

Clang.

The occasional, rhythmic strike of iron from the neighbouring industrial plants was the only pulse indicating an outside world still existed.

▪

"This is your chance to face the strongest batter—the fourth batter."

Those words ringing through the phone were enough to bestir the creature.

Its opponent had no intention of running away, choosing instead to bring the fight to its doorstep. In exchange, they made it agree to a certain set of conditions. Such negotiations were an utter waste of time, since it would've consented to anything so long as it could go on pitching. In the first place, it lacked the rationality to so much as scrutinise those conditions.

Dragging its body as if it were a revenant, the creature made for the designated address.

It was a solemn construction site, a cube-shaped multi-tenant building washed in bleaching insolation.

Its towering walls and the pitiless sun were all that filled the eye, evoking the desolate imagery of an apocalypse movie.

Yet, the moment it breached the interior and laid eyes upon the stadium, even the creature ground to a halt in sheer bewilderment.

"Stop right there. You see that plate? That's your mound, Sinker," the voice crackled from the phone.

A massive mirror mounted at the L-junction swallowed the corner entirely, projecting a clear reflection of the blind corridor beyond.

While they were separated by a corner, there was undoubtedly eighteen metres between the two players.

This was the special rule that its opponent demanded it adhere to.

"Won't be a problem, will it? The handicap goes both ways. Can't say I've ever dealt with a ball comin' outta a corner before."

The pitcher had to bend a ball at a right angle just to reach home plate.

On the other hand, the batter had only 0.3 seconds to react to the ball popping up before him. While such a feat was utterly beyond imagining for any pitcher, the fact that a batter's reaction within that window sounded marginally more plausible made it no less impossible.

An amused smirk crept across its face at the sheer absurdity of their game.

Even stripped of its rational mind, some instinct in the creature registered this for what it was: an unquestionable deathmatch.

"You need to warm up?"

It shook its head.

Beside the pitching plate lay a rosin bag for grip and an arsenal of over twenty baseballs—suggesting they had budgeted for an excruciatingly prolonged battle.

"...Heh."

Its consciousness still clouded in a thick white haze, the creature scoffed. It sneered at the player in the glass, mocking the absolute delusion that they would survive long enough to require that many pitches.

"....."

Then, the haze in its mind was bleached violently clean.

"It's time to get started, Sinker. Just as promised, you'll be facing the strongest batter."

Leaving those words behind, the man holding the cell phone withdrew from the hallway.

And a second figure—a bona fide slugger—strode into the batter's box.

Had he been in the mirror's blind spot the whole time?

After stretching his bat high into the sky, he let it settle onto his left shoulder. His tall, burly frame gave him the overwhelming presence and steadfastness of a boulder. With a single posture adjustment, what had seemed a rigid stance at first dissolved into the rhythm of the game as he read his opponent's every breath, all with the sole purpose of crushing his competitor.

"...!"

Sinker recognised that sight all too well.

It did not know his name. It possessed no data on what calibre of batter he was. And yet, it *knew* him. Its conscious memory had long since rotted away, but its right arm remembered.

In contrast to the endlessly talkative negotiator, this batter kept his lips sealed in a severe, horizontal line. He had absolutely nothing to say. With the fixed, dispassionate gaze of a hawk sighting prey, he held Sinker's reflection as though all words between them had long since been spent.

His eyes told more than words ever could.

Ecstasy began to surge within Sinker, thawing the frost from its body.

"...Heh."

A smile bled onto its face. A hammering static spiked in its skull.

This opponent was an anomaly. Its shattered cognitive functions trembled at the realisation.

Joy and terror surfaced at the same time.

The exhilaration of facing a worthy batter and the dread of a foe who could spell its end churned through its brain.

"Just what I wanted. Bring it on, Slugger!"

Its right arm whipped violently forward. Baptising the white leather in a coat of blood, the first pitch was fired.

▪

Just as a batter could identify a pitch by observing the pitcher, the reverse was equally true. By anticipating a batter's thought process, a pitcher could set the ball on

a trajectory that ran entirely counter to their expectations, carrying it well beyond the bat's reach. Confined to glimpsing one another through a mirror, their contest had already pushed far beyond the bounds of reason.

Each player's orientation was laterally inverted, their opponent sealed away behind a corner. Upon first glance, the pitcher was at a clear disadvantage.

Making out the strike zone was a herculean task in its own right, to say nothing of threading a pitch through it. With nothing but the opponent's reflection to go on, the pitcher would have to steer the ball into the strike zone after bending it at the right angle.

Such a feat was impossible for an ordinary pitcher—even coaxing the ball around the corner would be nothing short of a miracle. However, the pitcher standing atop the mound was Sinker. Even its opening pitch, treated as a warm-up, found its way homing into the batter's inner zone.

"Gh!"

The ball rushed toward him, thrown high and inside at a speed of over 130 kilometres per hour. After curving with a sharp arc, it shot past Kirisu the instant it entered his field of vision.

He couldn't look away, nor could he so much as stir his bat. It was as though the pitcher stood a mere ten metres away from him. This mirrored game of baseball placed the batter at an overwhelming disadvantage. Regardless, one question remained unanswered.

"Alright. So that movement just barely tails off the zone's edge."

Had Sinker already realised the truth? Its opponent hadn't failed to react to its inhuman pitch; he simply hadn't deigned to.

The count was now one ball.

Just as Sinker had acclimated himself to the rules of this game from the outset, so had Slugger committed every fibre of his being to laying the groundwork for victory from the very first pitch.

◇

"Was that...?"

Had its opponent let the ball past him on purpose?

Sinker shook its head, driving such a ridiculous notion away.

It had deliberately missed that first pitch, all in order to measure the batter's capabilities and the distance between them.

Per Sinker's predictions, its opponent should have barely twitched before wilting under the realisation of how outclassed he was.

"But that's impossible. Did he recognise my form?"

Its first pitch had been thrown with eighty percent of his power—the customary probe for reading the batter, the umpire, and the day's humidity level. Had its opponent read all of that from a single glance?

After a cursory roll of the shoulders, the challenger took on an entirely different stance. He extended both arms outward, elbows hanging loose—the archetypal form for going after an outside pitch.

"That bastard."

He was already provoking Sinker after a single pitch, drawing it into exactly the kind of mind game it had wanted to avoid. Its opponent issued a silent challenge, bracing as though he were a samurai ready to meet his foe's blade. Defeat awaited Sinker if it stepped up. It wasn't unusual for two elite players to foresee what the next two seconds held in store for them. Years of accumulated practice and experience enabled them to simulate each exchange before it played out. Although it wasn't infallible, the premonition of looming death often had a way of vindicating itself.

In this case, one pitch was all it took for that premonition to emerge. An ordinary pitcher would have given an intentional walk or fallen back on cautious inside pitching as a last resort. In fact, even Sinker couldn't escape the sense of ruin upon witnessing his stance. A single misstep leading the pitch outside, and the vision of its neck—no, its skull—being shattered with a single swing would come true.

"Don't you dare look down on me."

A frustration wholly foreign to it clawed at its guts. It took the second ball in hand, choking down its irritation.

It stood within an empty hallway, a space devoid of any sound whatsoever. But for all the clarity it granted it, the mound was much too cold.

Controlling the ball would never prove to be an issue for it.

In the first place, needing to bend the ball at a right angle was no shackle at all.

Sinker had held it to a single break on the first pitch, but the second wouldn't be so merciful. It had no mercy to spare on a batter who played such games.

That gaze was nothing but firewood for the rage smouldering inside it.

Those eyes drove straight through it—not merely sizing up its abilities, but searching for something else entirely. It seemed as though they were trying to ask Sinker a question.

Why—

That gaze of his sent a wave of static bolting through its unbridled bloodlust.

"Stop looking at me... with those blasted eyes!"

Dark speckles of blood bloomed around the ball.

With its right arm dyed crimson, the devil's pitcher wrenched its leg skyward to invite inexorable ruin upon his target.

◇

After watching the first pitch pass him by, Kirisu silently acknowledged the conditions of their peculiar game.

"This is bad. Stopping the second break ain't gonna do shit if this goes on."

Since he had effectively lost the ability to read the pitcher's form, parsing his opponent's motion would prove to be a fool's errand once the ball rounded the corner. The instant it swam into his field of vision, it was already a completely different pitch from what it had been at the point of release.

From the moment it made its first break, it was as though an invisible hand had acted at Sinker's behest.

A batter initiates their swing during the pitcher's wind-up, never after the ball has already left the hand. Given that the window for reading a pitch closes the moment the pitcher's leg drives upward, this contest would have to be decided on a purely mental level. Rather than reading the trajectory from his opponent's form, he would

have to do it by predicting his thoughts. With that in mind, the only thing he could actually deduce by observing Sinker was the ball's speed.

By timing his initial movement to the first break and identifying the pitch type on the second, his reaction window would be pared down from 0.5 seconds to a brutal 0.3.

At this point, it was practically a game of *Duck Hunt*.

His only choice was to abandon prediction entirely and switch to pure reaction. To top it all off, he only had 0.3 seconds. Such a feat lay well outside the purview of man—after all, it fell within the realm of gods. And needless to say, Kirisu was no exception. In other words—

"My best option's to dictate the ball's course myself."

If his instincts were the only weapon left to him, then his duty was to do whatever he could to ensure they landed.

Shedding his previous stance, he snapped into a grip built expressly for hunting outside pitches. A cautious pitcher would throw inside, while one playing to win would aim for the outside.

Sinker, naturally, was the latter. He uncorked his second pitch from a delivery Kirisu hadn't witnessed in years.

After turning the corner, the devil's pitch came barreling toward him at a blistering 140 kilometres per hour.

Riveting his eyes upon the ball, Kirisu sent his bat flying. His read of Sinker proved accurate, and his tempo matched the pitch perfectly. But in the end, his bat failed to even graze the ball. Breaking low and wide, the ball abruptly kicked skyward the instant it arrived before him.

"So that's his two-stage break, huh? Throws me off when following the damn thing with my eyes…"

One strike, one ball.

With his bat still gripped firmly in his hands, Kirisu raised it toward his forehead as if in prayer. In the midst of the suffocating silence, his focus settled into perfect stillness. *Still six centimetres off, huh?*

◇

"That batter..."

The second pitch was an emphatic victory for the pitcher.

Its opponent may have intended to restrict the ball's possible trajectories by pinning it inside, but such stratagems were entirely lost on Sinker.

Its original two-stage sinker broke at ten and fourteen metres, but the tight confines of this corridor forced it to snap the first break at the seven-metre mark instead, setting its blood ablaze at the exact instant the ball entered the batter's reach.

Though it only broke once after entering its field of vision, no human batter should have been able to react to that second ignition—that much had been proven by the swing before.

Yet for some reason, its opponent remained unfazed.

"Outside again?"

Pain lanced through its skull.

Caught in the mirror's reflection, its opponent's eyes betrayed not a trace of fear. That unyielding stare sent Sinker's head spinning. It rushed to blame the cold, telling itself it was no more than the biting frost responsible for the migraine hammering through its head.

Frustration baring its fangs, it reached out to the third ball. Plumes of white breath curled into the damp air. Shutting out the pain that had returned to harry its right elbow, Sinker coiled its right arm into its windup.

"Now, show me if that confidence is the real deal."

With a faint hope rising in its chest, it threw another devil's pitch to the outside.

This time, it was a slider—a pitch designed to claw its way back inside after its initial line, making it all but impossible to reach from a left-handed batter's stance.

◇

"It's starting outside."

Identifying the pitch type would do him no good.

Therefore, Kirisu Yaichirou devoted his full attention to the lingering embers of Sinker's former habits.

No matter how it was released, the pitch would metamorphose into something else entirely the instant it rounded the corner. Which part of the strike zone was he aiming for? He brought his intuition and insight to bear on answering that single question.

Peering through the mirror, he drank in every detail of Sinker's powerful, flawless delivery. Yet its beauty had dimmed from what it once was. Within the single second of Sinker's windup, Kirisu seared dozens of mental snapshots into his mind one after another, charting the ball's path as it bent around the corner.

Its rotation pointed to an outward slide, yet the pitcher's form told a different story entirely.

Within the 0.3 seconds that followed, he would pit his own will directly against the pitcher's.

Grazing the upper edge of the bat, the ball ricocheted and bounced sharply toward his rear.

Corrected by a margin of six centimetres, the foul was the inevitable product of the adjustment he had made since his earlier swing.

Kirisu Yaichirou stood rooted to the spot, having just touched a pitch no ordinary human could react to.

"I've got a vague read on it, but I'm not seeing the thing yet... Ain't gonna get used to that outside-to-inside break anytime soon."

Venting all the heat that had built up inside him, he turned to face his opponent once more.

Back in high school, he had believed a hundred days of training could be incinerated in the span of a single second at the plate. That conviction of his was proving true.

Right now, this slugger had committed every fibre of his being to each and every pitch, no differently to the pitcher whose death awaited the moment he gave up a hit. After all, he had once sustained, for three unbroken years, the devotion it took to pour his entire life into a single swing.

◇

"He… grazed it?"

A shiver ran down Sinker's spine as that sight reached it through the mirror. However, instead of the freezing cold, it was now a searing numbness that coursed through its back.

"Hey, we're only three balls in."

With a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips, its opponent taunted it.

Awash in indescribable frustration and vertigo, that piercing stare sent a wave of nausea cresting through it.

What the hell? What the hell is this creature? How is that even allowed? He grazed it from that position? Three pitches was all it took? No, he's only seen my two-stage sinker twice. That was enough for him to adapt? How the everliving fuck's that even possible?! This doesn't make any sense. How could a single person possess so much talent? It's pissing me off. How can a mere human have the instincts of a wild animal?

"You goddamn… monster!"

Even if it were reborn a thousand times over, Sinker knew it would never again chance upon an aberration of this calibre.

"Hah… hah…!"

A tremor seized it as its emotions went haywire, fresh heat surging back into its body in their wake.

The static pounding at its head swelled louder still.

Something was wrong. As a faint sound crept into the once-silent world, it curled his fingers around the fourth ball.

The count was two strikes and one ball. As things stood, it held an overwhelming advantage. Nevertheless, it knew in its bones the next pitch would not put this to rest. It had been the one guilty of underestimating its foe all along. Just as the monster before it had dissected it within three pitches, Sinker would spend the remainder of the count plumbing its foe's limits.

"Haaa..."

A thick cloud of white breath ghosted past its lips. In the corner of its vision, twenty more balls lay heaped in a basket on the ground.

They had been wise to prepare for a game of this length.

Sinker had known for the better part of an hour that its elbow had no more matches left in it, but that was of no importance.

It couldn't lose—it couldn't afford to stop pitching no matter what. The devil had once told it that the vitality of strife was the only thing keeping it alive. Said and done. Though every inch of its body cried out in agony, warmth continued to nestle its way back into it.

It gripped the fourth ball tightly, the crushing pain in its right elbow once again flaying its way into its brain cells.

Devoid of joy, it fed its suffering into its right arm as it pivoted to face the batter's reflection.

Their match raged on and on.

With each successive pitch, the static tore a deeper wound into him.

Six. Seven. Eight. They had already reached ten pitches.

Its opponent held firm, fouling off every pitch that came in barely outside and letting all the ones thrown to coax a whiff out of him sail past untouched.

The entire time, his gaze reflected through the mirror posed the same silent question.

Sinker's breathing was slowly regaining normalcy as the pitches mounted.

Drawing its blood-soaked right arm across its brow to wipe away the sweat, it found that a puddle of crimson had already pooled beneath it.

That deep red yanked its clouded consciousness into sudden clarity.

—A dusken park.

—A blazing stadium.

—A lonely, wintry field.

Hanging from the ceiling was a—

"....."

Suddenly, an unfamiliar memory flitted through its mind.

Anger had been Sinker's only companion for as long as memory served.

The only reason it had been able to withstand the suffering baseball brought it was because of that.

However, as hatred continued to consume it, so too did its enjoyment for the sport continue to fade. The prospect of coming to loathe baseball from the very bottom of his heart terrified it.

"Shut—"

Sinker poured every system within its body into the simple act of breathing.

Both of them were putting their lives on the line with each pitch. It had only thrown ten pitches, yet their match felt as though it had stretched on for an eternity.

Glaring into the mirror, it told itself that its opponent had to be suffering just as much under these conditions.

Its opponent's breathing had grown slightly laboured, fatigue finally showing in the fingers that gripped his bat. Now was Sinker's chance. It would pour every last shred of force it had into ensuring that bat never so much as brushed its next pitch. But its opponent wasn't dead yet. Those eyes of his were the only thing that had remained completely unmoved since the beginning.

That unyielding gaze put questions to Sinker with more ferocity than words could ever manage.

Why? Why are you still pitching?

"—the hell up!"

They had already reached a full count. Another pitch outside the zone would hand its opponent the match.

The batter managed to react in the nick of time as the devil's pitch broke from low to high on the outer half.

"He grazed it again!"

Fury toward its opponent's wiles began to erupt within it.

The man had been fixating solely on grazing the ball, having long since accepted that a clean hit was beyond him. All along, his strategy had been to wear Sinker down with foul after foul, biding his time for exhaustion to force a misstep.

Rage coursed through its mind. Its devil's pitch was meant to be unassailable, yet this man kept finding its edge time and time again.

"I'll kill you."

The flames of its bloodlust seared Sinker's body.

With the same headache plaguing it, the pain pulsing through its right elbow only worsened. It only had a few more rounds left in it—its elbow had already been incapable of repairing itself in time by the sixth pitch. No, perhaps it would reach its limit with the next one. Nothing else mattered. All it had to do was settle this within the next pitch.

It sent a shootball that slid past the outside corner after breaking, only to yield the same foul tip as before. There was no doubting it anymore. A mere two millimetres of adjustment, but the batter was getting closer and closer to a perfect swing each time.

Its molars creaked together. If they had faced each other in a proper stadium, the match would've been over long ago.

"No, it wouldn't matter anyway. We're both playing under the same conditions here."

Sinker couldn't afford to let the opponent adapt any further. It couldn't afford to fixate on the outside any longer. If it threw inside, there was no way that bat could chase the ball down from that stance. But was that truly the right answer? There was no reason why it wouldn't work. Its opponent hadn't had the opportunity to adapt to its inside pitch yet. Despite that, its instincts cautioned against it. All that batter had to do was to tuck his arms in and pivot his hips to go inside. Even from that stance, he was perfectly capable of getting his swing off in time.

Sinker understood that fact all too well—after all, it was one of the oldest tricks in his book. By sending the deciding pitch inside, it would break its opponent's spirit by blindsiding him entirely. However, that was exactly why it couldn't do it. It couldn't throw a pitch inside. If it did, something told Sinker defeat would be all that awaited. Yet for some reason, the logic behind that truth escaped it.

"Just what the hell *is* he?"

Frustration began to scorch its sight. Reflected through the cheap mirror, the batter's face alone seemed to swim behind a veil of haze. Without a clear target to fix on to, its bloodlust could only run aimlessly.

Still, it had been a while since it last felt this way. Where bloodlust and rage had been its constant occupants, tension now coiled tightly around its heart.

Stifling the urge to cry out, it kept itself focused solely on the game. Only after bringing this worthy foe down would it give itself leave to celebrate. When was it that it had forgotten this feeling?

"Bring it on. If you wanna hit outside so badly, I'll give you exactly what you want."

The devil's number, thirteen.

Sinker dropped its hips low toward the mound. The moment it tried to drop its delivery from sidearm to underhand, an indescribable pain ripped through its musculature.

"Agh… gah…"

And just like that, the same void found its way into its cranium once more. From the simple act of shifting its centre of gravity, a fissure seemed to tear through its entire frame.

"Heh, what a sick joke."

Its exhausted joints and muscles shrieked beneath excruciating pain.

Not that it mattered anymore. So what if this was the end for its elbow? In baseball, taking too long to pitch could result in a delay-of-game violation. It stole a brief moment to pull itself together before getting set. This time, it would deliver a pitch worthy of the name Sinker.

Reading its intent, the batter bore down into a deeper state of concentration, his already keen gaze sharpening further still. How strange. Even though it couldn't see his face, it could make out his eyes so clearly.

Faced with its bloodlust, its opponent simply answered in kind. He was everything Sinker desired. Maintaining the same steadfast intent to drive back that outside pitch, the target hurled the same words at it once more.

Why? Why are you still pitching?

Why do you continue this endless suffering?

His piercing eyes spoke directly to Sinker.

It wasn't your fault that everything came to an end.

But still, there's no changing the past now. The curtain of your dream has already been closed. No matter how hard you try to draw it open, there's nothing left for you to see behind the screen.

"Hah... gh..."

Those words tore through it.

Silence had only just sealed over the world, yet some grating sound now plagued its ears.

In the past, it had once tried opening the closed curtain of a cinema.

However, all that awaited it after the credits was an empty wall. Though he watched on in helpless exasperation, the face of the friend who had shared in that same disappointment was—

"What the hell..."

Its elbow protested with a deep ache, dragging a tide of heat through its body with it, and the familiar static crept back into its ears. The frayed, excruciating memories of the person it once was were growing more vivid.

"...do you know about me?!"

It drove its left foot skyward. Planting it toward the batter's reflection, Sinker arched the right side of its body like a fan.

——In the next moment, a scorching, all-consuming collapse seized its brain.

/

When I lurched back to consciousness, I found myself in the midst of a familiar sight.

We were climbing up a long slope.

A lone woman stood with a laden trolley, throwing herself against it in a desperate bid to push it up the hill.

It was the memory of a painful summer—a scene I had watched play out more times than I could count. As the trolley came to a halt halfway up the slope, we simply stood there, with no one coming to our aid.

The shrilling of the cicadas provided the only chains tying us to society. After all, we didn't deserve to share anything else with the rest of the world.

Not once did I feel any anger toward our situation; all I ever felt was a deep sadness for our pitiful selves. I wanted to break down crying, the way any child had every right to.

However, before that could happen, something far more painful to witness had already caught my eye.

The woman let out a silent, voiceless cry before I ever could.

Her useless son. Her useless self. The crushing guilt of subjecting a child only eight years of age to such suffering. The utter powerlessness she felt as a mother. Despite grappling with those emotions every single day, not once did she let a single word of resentment past her lips.

She never cursed her misfortune, nor did she ever lash out at others for discriminating against her.

All she could do was turn over the same unanswerable question of how things had come to this.

Knowing full well that no salvation would ever come, she fell apart in silence, entirely on her own, never once reaching out for help.

Honestly, I always thought I'd be the first one to break. But after witnessing the state she was in, I could never bring myself to cry.

That's right. That was why I swore—

Why did I continue to play baseball? The answer to that question was blatantly obvious. Not once did I seek to be understood. I had no intention of asking for help, nor of laying my burdens on anyone else. All I ever wanted was to be left alone. I was sick of being treated like a liability for my weakness—tired of being persecuted for the simple fact of having been born into poverty. So long as I kept my head down and gave them no reason, no one would bother with me. That was why I learned to make my peace with things as they were.

Having my elbow broken turned out to be a lesson well worth learning. I didn't hold a grudge. After all, I had no time to spare on such things to begin with. Every hour I could've spent wallowing in sorrow was better off spent on practice.

"Dude, just give up already. You're never gonna be able to pitch again."

I was used to being laughed at. But my tireless effort would surely be rewarded in the end. My friend's words were what had first lit a fire under me to become a first-rate pitcher.

"I mean, have you heard about his mom?"

Shut up. Shut up! SHUT UP!

How did they manage to dredge up so much heat for something that was none of their damn business? How could those blessed enough to worry about others be capable of such envy? It didn't make any sense. They hungered in spite of their own fullness, their faces bloated with wasteful flab.

"You don't have any friends, do you, Senpai? Since you're always so lonely, we came over to hang out."

Right. I haven't been able to bring myself to return home since that day.

Every single day killed me inside, but arriving at the front door never once failed to breathe life back into me. I didn't tell her that my elbow was beyond saving. A mere few months of struggle wouldn't be enough to deter me. Even with the odds stacked against me, I swore I'd find a way back to the pitch. Unable to bear letting her down for even a moment, I pushed open the front door and called out that I was home.

An unfamiliar decoration atop the dinner table caught my eye.

Looking closer, I saw that it rocked gently, like a wind chime stirred by a stray breeze.

With an apologetic look on her face, the woman who had waved to me that very morning was now slowly spinning aloft.

I shut the front door, our neighbour calling out to me not long after. She was a mild-mannered housewife with a voice of almost jarring brightness.

"My, everyone left already? It's not often you have friends over. Since they were all carrying around their gear, I'm guessing they're your clubmates?"

His underclassmen bore no responsibility for what happened.

All they did was pay his home a visit. All they did was mock her, heap condemnation on her, and expose what had truly become of her son.

The truth was simple—she had already been pushed past her breaking point long before then. With a final apology for having ruined her son's dreams, the woman who had grown too weary to go on bowed out of the race.

Apparently, it all happened on a certain day in December.

I can't really make sense of any of it anymore.

Besides, I'm sure it has nothing to do with me.

/

"Gh... haaa..."

In the next moment, the scorching pain of collapse reawakened Sinker's will.

"Kh... AAAAHHHH!"

Anger beyond all reckoning stoked the devil coiled within its right arm, a surge of bloodlust lashing its fractured body back together.

Anger. Rage. Fury. An unidentifiable flame burned inside of it. This directionless wrath had always been the engine driving it.

Hurtling at a blistering speed of 150 kilometres per hour, Sinker's pitch would undoubtedly settle the score this time.

Originally thrown outside and high, its sinker plummeted further than any pitch it'd thrown before.

Clang.

Even so, its opponent somehow managed to catch the ball by a hair's breadth.

"You've gotta be kidding me, Slugger."

Anger and joy erupted together, crashing into each other inside its chest, threatening to swallow what little remained of its conscious mind.

He was *perfect.* This was the rival Sinker had always envisioned in its most fevered dreams. There would never be a more worthy foe. None of the frauds it previously faced could hold a candle to him. Sinker cursed the world, railing against the fate it had been damned to.

Where had this man been all along? Why had it taken this long for him to show himself? Why? Why?! WHY?!?!

The very thought made it want to tear the world apart. Why couldn't he have come forward before Sinker had been ground down to such a wretched state? The answer eluded it, but that was of no importance anymore. Right now, the only thing of any consequence was the anger and joy warring within. Unbridled praise and naked hostility were all it had to offer the opponent who had spent everything just to graze its flawless pitch.

Sinker itself was by now scarcely distinguishable from a walking corpse. Failing to take the strikeout on that pitch was tantamount to being handed a death warrant.

However, none of that was enough to overturn the fact that victory was already in its grasp.

"I won."

Barely moments ago, it had watched its opponent's elbow give way on that final swing. One more move, and it'd be checkmate. It would strike him out with the next pitch, leaving nothing behind but the sound of Slugger's skull caving in.

"Haaah... hah..."

Its bloodstained right hand groped toward the final ball. There'd be no missing this time.

"Huh? Damn it... what's wrong with me?"

For some reason, it couldn't get a proper grip on the ball. No, in the first place, it could barely make the basket out through the white blur.

Just one more pitch. One more, and it would all be over. Yet its vision had gone entirely white.

The sun's too bright today. If only I'd thought to bring a cap. This hood won't be able to protect me from heatstroke. Oh, but I've never tried buying a cap for myself, have I?

"Gh... ah..."

Propping itself against the basket, it coiled his fingers around the ball.

It had already spent far too much blood. By this point, it was past being able to rationalise that its failing vision was the result of low blood pressure. It had been reduced to a state that required devoting its entire body toward the simple act of drawing breath.

Sinker deemed this situation checkmate.

Indeed, that was an unshakeable truth. It was just that its shattered mind could no longer discern which of them had hit their breaking point.

The same static kept gnawing at its skull.

The fibre of its arm muscles had already been partially torn from the bone. Its right shoulder bore no resemblance to its original form. With a rift travelling clean through it, a single pitch would be enough to shatter its elbow entirely.

"I know. But still, I need to do this."

Right now, the only thing left was the heat still clinging to its body.

The distant clanging of iron stirred its numbed consciousness awake.

Suffering was nothing new to Sinker. It had long since learned to carry it without complaint for the sake of its dream.

If so, then what was it fighting for right now?

It couldn't tell anymore. With both its sight and its reason for being lost, Sinker readied itself to throw the closing pitch of its career.

◇

The pitches screeched through the air at a blistering speed.

Five. Six. Seven.

With every pitch that passed, Sinker sharpened his claws further as the wounds across his body cut deeper.

"Haaahh..."

While he may have seemed invincible to Sinker, Kirisu knew from the outset that he was treading on thin ice.

Breaking at the ten-metre mark, the devil's pitch scraped the strike zone's edge at 140 kilometres per hour.

To Kirisu, calibrating to a pitch of that calibre was akin to shaving a decade off his lifespan.

Forty percent of his focus was committed to covering the outside, with an equal share held in reserve for the inside. The remaining twenty percent he kept on constant vigil for blunders.

Sinker wouldn't attempt to kill Kirisu until he struck him out, yet there was always the possibility of an unintended beanball. The devil's pitch was wearing away at both his body and mind. Sooner or later, his grip on the ball would slip.

"Tch, gotta shake that thought off."

When that time came, would Kirisu even be able to avoid it?

A hit to the head meant instant death. There was no evading a ball that changed course a mere ten metres from his face. The only reason he could swing in time at all

was because he'd already conditioned himself for it—no ordinary human could compel their body to react at such a speed.

Death stood beside him within this batter's box.

Sinker would deliver his death sentence the moment he struck out, yet there was every chance he'd lose his life even before it came to that.

Just as Sinker surrendered himself further to collapse with each pitch, so too did Kirisu yield his life to the ball.

He had to stop him. He had to stop him *now*.

No, he *needed* to stop him. Those pitches of his needed to be stopped before it was too late.

With every heave, Kirisu tamped down the fear working its way into his mind.

There was no reacting to Sinker's pitches without throwing every last sense he had into tracking the ball.

Hearing shared an especially intimate connection with sight, the two working in concert through the brain. Both information gathered by the ears and images taken in by the eyes were all part of a single, larger whole. By capitalising on that, Kirisu sharpened both his spatial recognition and awareness. Tuning into his left ear, he forcefully fed all the necessary information into the right hemisphere of his brain, the seat of visual perception.

Kirisu wasn't hitting fouls in order to draw the game out and exhaust Sinker. Every last swing was a failed bid at getting a hit. He'd never missed a single swing before, yet now the best he could manage after seven pitches was to barely graze the ball.

Whatever unease Sinker felt stood no chance of measuring up to Kirisu's.

Neither player who stood on that field had ever known defeat. An opponent who eclipsed their very notion of victory was something neither had ever encountered before.

"This shit's terrifying, damn it."

For the first time ever, Kirisu felt his heart hammering against his ribs as he dug in at the plate.

He wanted to finish this as soon as he could. Every subsequent pitch only made the tension more palpable.

Scoring a hit had long since stopped crossing his mind; even a walk would be enough to satisfy him. The moment Sinker made a mistake, he would simply stand there and watch. Once his end was secured, Ishizue Arika would handle the rest.

Eight. It was a close pitch. Depending on the umpire, it had every chance of being called a strike. The instant that realisation sank in, he brought his bat through at full speed.

Batting was an extended chain of motion that ran the full length of the human body, from the ankles up to the wrists. It was a series of rotations, each performed in its rightful order. The first kick was not a signal for a full rotation; each movement acted as a catalyst for the next, building further acceleration. From the legs to the waist. The waist to the spine. The spine to the shoulders. Building to a greater velocity at each stage, the chain culminates at 140 kilometres per hour by the time it reaches its terminus in the bat.

"How about... this!"

Despite knowing exactly where the pitch would land, he still came up short by several centimetres. There was no overcoming the limits of a human's reflexes. Had he committed his full concentration to the outside, then perhaps he would've barely been able to make it.

Unfortunately, that was out of the question. In the first place, his stance was meant to incite a pitch thrown inside. Even then, grazing the ball would've been the best he could muster, but writing that possibility off entirely wasn't something he could afford to do.

The most fundamental aspect of batting was restricting a pitcher's options. Reverting to a neutral stance would render everything he had done up to that point meaningless. Allowing his opponent free reign would undoubtedly lead to his defeat.

The pitcher reached out to his next ball.

Kirisu's time for pondering had come to an end. He sank deep into concentration and scrutinised his opponent's form anew.

"Iguruma..."

Every single time, he registered Sinker's rage staring back at him from within that reflection.

Why did things end up like this? All we ever wanted was to keep playing baseball. I didn't do anything wrong. It's society that wouldn't even allow me to simply play baseball. Everybody kept getting in my way like it was some kinda sick joke. Was it really that hard to accept a weakling like me making it this far?

He heard those desperate cries coming from Sinker's right shoulder, whose form continued to deteriorate with each passing pitch. In contrast to that, his breaking balls were carving a miraculous path as their speed steadily built.

Within that blur, he caught a flash of a child's eyes, levelling condemnation at the traitor who stood before him.

I can't throw pure heat without a stronger frame anyway, so I'm just gonna grind 'till I can snap off a filthy breaking ball!

This was no time to be distracted by such sentiments.

But he couldn't help but find his old friend somewhere within that unrecognisable shell of a figure.

Everything was different back then.

The only thing that united them was their love for baseball.

No, in the end, even that turned out to be a mere misunderstanding.

They had gazed in the same direction, yet their eyes had been taken by completely different sights.

Blind to that crucial fact, it would fall to Kirisu to push his friend closer to the edge than anyone else ever had.

Nine.

With a spark, the ball carved a piercing turn toward Kirisu as though passing judgement on him as a traitor.

Sinker's right arm was littered with wounds, testament enough that he'd long since reached and surpassed his limit. Pushing through the unimaginable pain, he

simply continued pitching. This was who Iguruma Kazumi had become for the past six years—a solitary king who could no longer find a shred of joy from baseball.

To Kirisu, the sight of that figure radiated with a light much too blinding to bear.

The pitcher screamed.

He cried out, branding Kirisu a traitor who had cast baseball aside.

He shouted out, branding Kirisu a fool who had refused to lay his life down for the sport in spite of his God-given talent.

Each of those charges was an undeniable truth. It was only natural that Sinker detested Kirisu Yaichirou. However, to this day, Kirisu had never regretted his choice for a single moment.

"Dedicating my youth to baseball's the best I can do. Unlike you, I don't have it in me to risk my life for the game."

That was why he never fell apart.

Come what may, he would never play the wounded hero who staked his life on the things he loved.

My mum's been smiling a lot lately. Said she's happy everyone keeps talking me up.

Ten.

It was a cut fastball delivered in the form of spewing flames.

Which one of them harboured a greater fear of death?

Was it the batter condemned to meet his end on a single whiff or wayward pitch? Or was it the pitcher who was destined to crumble at the end of a prowess that defied human knowledge?

Simple. The answer was Kirisu.

After all, Sinker's burning rage drowned out whatever fear might have festered within him.

His dream had already come to an end. The remnants of that unfulfilled dream were all that fuelled his corpse at this point.

The pitcher remained oblivious to everything. He hadn't even registered that with every pitch he was shedding blood, slowly drowning the mound in a crimson sea.

"Ugh..."

It was too painful a sight to look at, but he couldn't bring himself to look away. All he could do now was bring things to an end. The how of it no longer mattered, only that it happened quickly. Though he'd already made up his mind, Kirisu couldn't bring himself to take that final step.

He already had the timing down. In addition, he understood that his foe would never pitch inside. Despite knowing he could bring it all to a close by throwing everything he had at the outside, he let the match run on.

Fear was numbing his rational mind. Kirisu continued averting his eyes from the truth, and so it was that they found their way to the thirteenth pitch.

In the end, it was Sinker who moved first to break the deadlock.

He switched from a sidearm to an underhand delivery—a motion that would only push his body further toward ruin. He was like a wounded swan writhing in its death throes, holding every witness transfixed with the fluid grace of his motion.

If his previous pitches were writhing flames, then this sinker was a bolt of lightning.

"Agh...!"

He brought his nine-hundred-gram bat through with everything he had. Accompanied by the hiss of scorched air, he grazed the ball once more.

"Nghh...!"

A dull pain ran through his arm in compensation. The only reason he had been able to track that wicked drop at all was the countless failed attempts he had accumulated in the past. He'd overextended himself in the act of correcting his swing. Though he had barely made contact, his right elbow began to cramp with an unpleasant pain.

"Shit, did I pull something?"

There was a distinct possibility he severed a muscle.

Batting and pitching alike were exercises of precision, and a single miscalculation was all it took to invite injury. Kirisu was sending a 140-kilometre-per-hour ball back within 0.3 seconds. In his case, correcting the course of his swing mid-motion could load several hundred kilograms of force onto his shoulders, elbows, and fingers.

"I'm screwed. I've only got one good swing left in me."

With that, going inside was no longer an option. Going by the pain in his elbow, an inside pitch would guarantee a strikeout. Still, that didn't mean he had the confidence to score a hit on another sinker either.

In other words, his defeat was all but assured.

The next pitch would almost certainly be the last thing Kirisu Yaichirou ever faced.

"You're telling me this is it? Cut the crap… I refuse to let things end like this."

He turned to face his foe once more. The truth was, the pitcher staring back at him from the mirror had driven himself even further than Kirisu had.

Sinker fumbled the ball into his grip.

Without so much as regulating his breathing, he moved into the set-up.

"You idiot. That's—"

He was setting to deliver a dead ball.

In a heartbeat, the defeat Kirisu had resigned himself to was overturned.

There was no doubt about it. After rounding the corner, the pitch would drop at Kirisu's feet without making its second break. Victory was his. Sidestepping the ball was a trivial matter so long as he had its course mapped out beforehand.

"……"

All he had to do was let the ball whizz by.

The count was already at four balls. One more, and it'd be his victory with a walk. And yet, for all that understanding, he forcefully swung his bat toward the ball as it strayed well outside of the strike zone.

Just like that, the needless foul ball cracked off toward the wall.

Staring at his own reflection in disbelief, he finally unearthed the answer he'd been searching for. He finally realised the truth behind his regrets. He finally realised whose dream it had been to play this match out all along.

Kirisu, do you still remember that stupid promise we made? If you do... then please... just forget about it.

"Ah, so that's it."

That was why he kept their match going despite being faced with death.

He hadn't realised until now just how much he'd been enjoying himself.

A lost summer dream. A promise he himself had gone back on.

A duel with Iguruma Kazumi, the pitcher who had made all of Shikura tremble and been bestowed the gilded title of genius.

At this moment, all of it had finally come to fruition.

There was no way he wouldn't be enjoying himself.

There was no way he wouldn't desire a fitting conclusion.

There was no way he wouldn't wish for it to never end.

"But this is where it ends. Now that I've realised the truth, it's time to bring both our dreams to a close."

And precisely because it had been so enjoyable, its end was all the more sadder for it. The long-standing dream that had stirred to life between them would have no one to bear witness to its conclusion.

He heard the sound of striking iron in the distance.

Clang. Clang.

They stood in the hollow of a construction site devoid of people. The shrill cry of iron was all that answered their ears—a far cry from the roar of a stadium crowd. He recalled those breezy, thoughtless words he had once uttered.

Baseball's about whether you played a good game or not, right? I don't get why results are so—

How heartless he had been.

Why had it taken so long for him to see his own arrogance for what it was?

The self-serving, cruel dream of a genius.

The desperate, earnest dream of one with nothing left to stake but himself.

Even after giving up on baseball and surrendering himself to a life of self-indulgence, Kirisu Yaichirou had never lost his purity.

On the other hand, while Iguruma Kazumi's dream lacked that same quality, it was something worth taking pride in.

That was all that mattered here. When all was said and done, it was he, and not Sinker, who had carried a deeper regret toward baseball all along.

I'll become a pitcher that no one else can beat. So you become a batter that no one else can beat too. And then, one day—

He'd never bring himself to speak that cruel promise aloud again.

The truth was clear from the start. Someone who possessed nothing and someone who possessed everything were never going to see eye to eye. Their paths would never cross until the end.

But still, they'd once gazed upon the same sight—the two of them had shared a destination. And in the end, when the race ran out, neither had made it there. Why couldn't he have accepted it from the start? Back when they played their innocent ball game, Kirisu Yaichirou's dream had already come true.

"Heh, you wanted to duke it out on the big stage, didn't you? Turns out I was the one who dreamed bigger all along."

It was his fault. It was Kirisu who had betrayed him first—he was the one who had stopped in his tracks. It had started long before his second year of high school. His bat had been clouded with uncertainty from the moment he began to fear for his friend, and in doing so, he had gone on to betray his hopes. He had no idea how much pain he'd inflicted on him because of it.

Could he still make it in time?

They stood in an empty cinema.

Even with no film left to roll, was there still something left to witness behind that screen?

"....."

He cinched his grip and stretched his arms out.

After emptying his lungs completely, Slugger stepped back into the batter's box.

Eighteen metres away stood the serial killer responsible for the recent clamour. However, Kirisu chose to address him by the name he'd given him long ago.

"Sup. Keep ya waiting long, Sinker?"

Nostalgia welled up within him.

It had been ten whole years since he last spoke that signal.

He would waver no more.

Everything rested on the next pitch. Directing his focus outside—on Iguruma Kazumi's trump card, the sinker—he readied himself to stake his life on the next swing.

◇

It awakened to a sound that pierced its eardrums.

Both its consciousness and vision were obscured by a blanket of white.

Any semblance of memory escaped it.

Its name, its objective, and its purpose were all lost to it now.

At this point, it was no more than a phantom. The being once known as Sinker had been reduced to a bare machine, groping for the ball out of sheer desperation.

But their match wasn't over yet.

Its opponent still awaited him.

It drew breath again, driven by nothing more than the delusion that it could not go home until it had disposed of his foe.

"Keep ya waiting long, Sinker?"

On the strength of those words, from the friend it had once looked up to more than any other soul during childhood, it recovered the sound it had long since lost.

/

He finally remembered why.

Clouds towered high above them, the cicadas' shrilling plastered to their skin. Beside him was a woman wailing on the ground.

That summer, he witnessed a sight much too painful to bear—a day that carved into him a sorrow so entrenched it gnawed at his chest without ever making a sound.

That was why he swore to save her.

Money didn't matter to him anymore. Enjoyment didn't matter to him anymore. After all, a far weightier purpose had taken root inside.

"Right, I—"

For that purpose alone, he had taken every blow that suffering saw fit to land on him.

No matter how pathetic it made him look, he refused to give up on pitching.

What was it that had goaded him into clawing his way toward the pros? Was it because he loved baseball? Because he wanted to escape from poverty? Because he wanted to make everyone who had mocked him eat their words? No. None of those were what his fingers closed around the ball for.

Everything he did was for the sake of the sight he had witnessed that day. All of it was for her—the woman who had been thrust into this world with nothing but suffering waiting for her. All he had ever wanted was to hand her something she could stand tall for, something that gave her life enough meaning to keep going.

He finally remembered.

Iguruma Kazumi's dream had never truly belonged to him.

From first to last, his only wish had been to save his mother.

However, she was gone now.

The reason he had sworn to never stop pitching had been taken from him.

The childlike resolve that had driven him to leave their paradise was stripped away. Just like that—

"Ah, but that dream's over now."

Eight months ago, on that day in December, the curtain had already fallen on his life, without him ever being rewarded.

/

"....."

My consciousness returned, the blanket of white over my vision finally fading.

Somewhere in the distance, that same piercing iron cry reached me. The midsummer sun scorched my flesh, and my body was so utterly spent that even the simple act of drawing breath had become an ordeal.

"Right. ...A full count. It isn't over yet."

Crush whatever pitch I throw with everything you've got.

I once called out those words to an old friend when I was on the verge of giving up. Baseball had become nothing but pain to me. I tried to run from my own vow once before, but...

There were times when I actually had fun with it.

That's right. The only reason I had been able to keep fighting for this long was because of those memories. Day after day until sundown, I played the same game with a friend whose name I couldn't remember anymore.

Wait, whose memories *were* those again?

"Ah..."

I heard a sound.

A racket that got on my nerves.

This place was just like a scorching frying pan.

I stood in an azure prison all on my lonesome.

The same way things had always been.

How nostalgic.

Clang. I heard the shrill noise of striking iron.

From far away, the silent echoes of a roaring crowd drifted into my ears.

I owed them a performance, after all.

Did I still have another pitch in me?

There was no need to even ask.

Winter was over. Now, there was only the stifling heat of summer left. Each breath seared its way through my lungs. The rising heat haze obscured the stadium from my vision. My heart was pounding in excitement. Once more, the blinding light of that summer came flooding back into my right arm.

A lone batter's silhouette awaited me within the depths of the mirror.

Who was he again?

I couldn't remember anymore. But still, I had to pitch. For the sake of the one who had called me Sinker, I had to throw a pitch worthy of that promise we made so long ago.

I dragged my shirt across my right hand, wiping the blood away.

One last time, I swung my broken arm into the air.

It was the greatest pitch of my life.

And then, in my final moments, I heard the sound of everything finally coming to an end.

▪▪▪

The ball soared into the air.

Unmarked by a single speck of blood, it arrowed cleanly toward the batter reflected in the mirror.

The devil's wall loomed in its path. Within this bent corridor, that single wall would turn back every pitch thrown against it.

The ball should've met its end there. His pitch stood no chance of ever reaching its destination.

It was beautiful. Like a swan lifting gracefully off the water, the greatest pitch of his life carved a magnificent arc as it rounded the corner.

It didn't bend at a right angle anymore.

It didn't move at the same blistering speed anymore.

However, that was exactly why it was so dazzling.

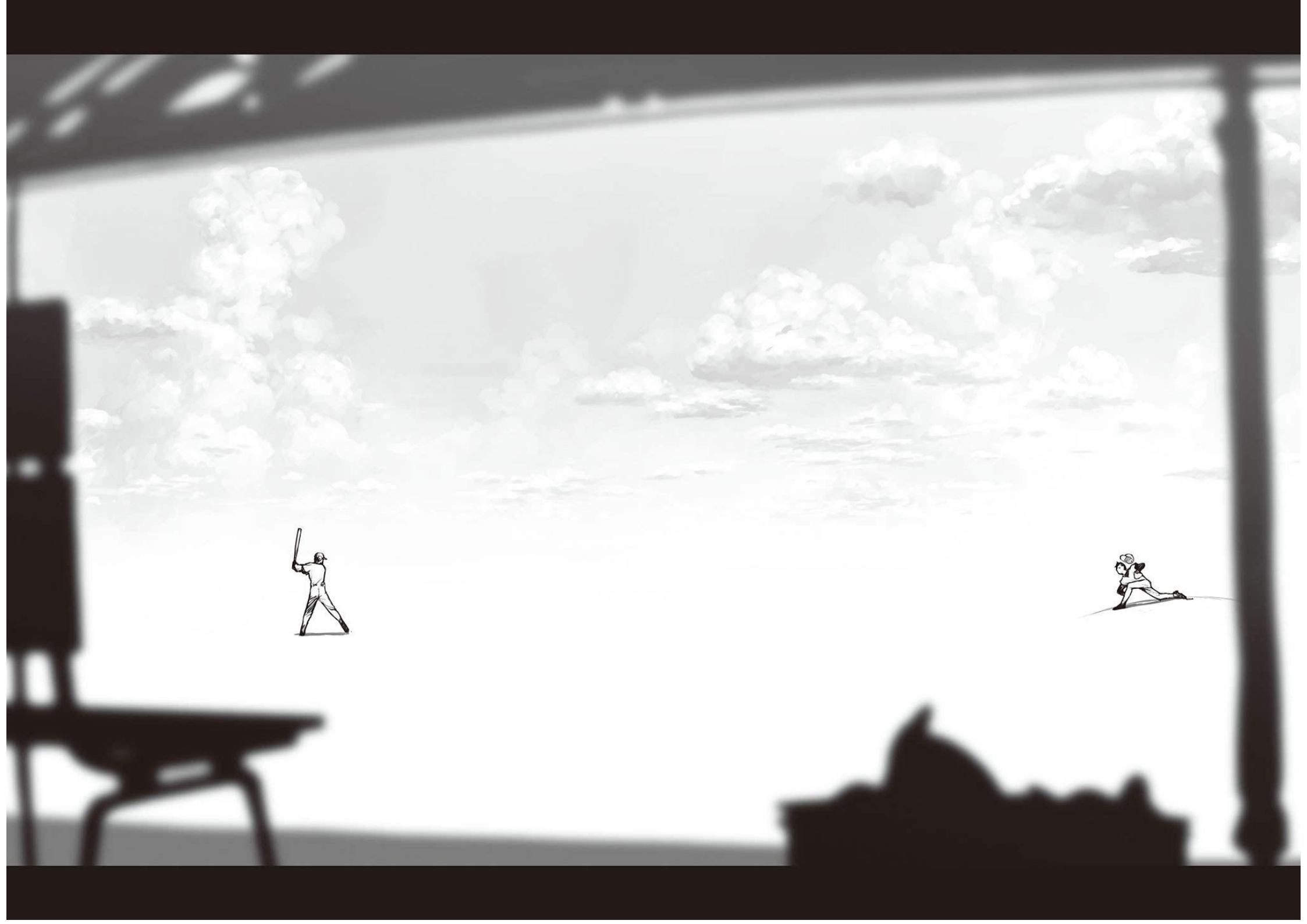
This was not the work of a man in a devil's thrall. Devils reached such heights only through deceit and sleight of hand. But this was a triumph belonging to a single man. Wonders that transgressed the pales of mortal ken had always been the sole domain of God.

Therefore, none could justly condemn his feat as the work of a devil.

It was the radiant heat haze of a summertime promise, thrown for the first and last time within this forsaken stadium.

The count was two strikes and three balls.

As the final pitch climbed and broke toward the outside corner, Kirisu Yaichirou raised his right leg into the air, swinging his bat one last time in perfect concert with his breathing.



x / Present (Summer 2004)

▪

Just like that, all my plans for summer break had been ruined.

Not that I had much lined up to begin with, but once the string of killings that nearly sent shockwaves through society had finally settled, all that remained was a return to the same dull routine.

The mysterious serial killer known as Sinker vanished before he could become anything more than an urban legend. Iguruma Kazumi's arrest was carried out behind closed doors, and the murders themselves were quietly written off as the work of a drug addict born of July's influx of illicit narcotics.

Because of that, it would take a while before the peculiar crimes committed by sufferers of Agonist Disorder reached the public eye.

"Gotta admit, that was one heck of a plot twist. It was so perfect that it made a chill run down my spine. What do you guys think?"

I glanced over my shoulder at the pair standing behind me, but neither of them bothered to reply.

It was another sweltering afternoon in the latter half of August, and we were standing on the baseball grounds of Shikura First High. While sorting through my luggage earlier, I had stumbled across the key to the rear gate. On a whim, I had dragged Kirisu and Tsuranui out for some midday antics before I eventually returned it.

Kirisu sat cross-legged beneath the merciless sun, letting the heat leach across his skin, while Tsuranui had taken it upon herself to splash water across the field for no discernible reason whatsoever.

"This is crazy. Who would've thought the club would mellow out this much after we graduated? Think they're gonna disband any time soon?"

"Good question. Heard they might not even have enough members next year. Oh well, there's no stopping the times from changing. Baseball's turned into a luxury nowadays."

"Man, talk about a shitty society we live in."

I was devastated enough to consider throwing myself onto the dirt and rolling around, but unfortunately, I was a little too old for that sort of display. Life gets awfully boring once you hit twenty.

"By the way, Kirisu. You serious about moving into my place?"

"What, got a problem with that? If you do, I'll find somewhere else to crash. Your rent's freaking cheap as it is, and now it's getting cut in half. 'Sides, it makes things easier if something like that ever comes up again."

By that, he meant another incident like Sinker's.

Even after we fulfilled the request, our client had thrown a massive fit over Iguruma Kazumi being handed over to the police, carving a sizable chunk out of our reward.

It was still a significant amount of money, but things only felt worse after Kaie took his fifty percent cut.

"Don't be ridiculous. Kirisu's the one who dealt with Sinker. Why should I give you anything when all you did was sit there and watch? Ah, but here's a little bonus for playing that baseball board game with me. You ought to consider buying a bat with that money, by the way. Never know when you're gonna be attacked by some random serial killer, right?"

My devil of an employer seemed to enjoy picking on me. Seriously, why did he have to be such a stingy asshole when he already had a mountain of wealth? They say people only amass fortunes because of said stinginess, but such logic usually only stretched so far. In Kaie's case, he could start handing cash out by the bucketful and still never see the bottom of the well.

"What, you still pissed or somethin'? I thought your memories reset when the day ended."

"There's no resetting the sorry state my wallet's in. I haven't even got my first paycheck yet."

"Why don't you just accept another request? Didn't that brat say he'd throw more work your way if you were up for it?"

"Hell no. I ain't getting involved with the Possessed ever again."

Indeed, that was the biggest takeaway I had gained at the end of this mess.

Fortunately enough, I didn't have any memory of Sinker's expulsion, since it had taken place during the day. But still, there were things I had learned during the night that would never leave me—the notes I had taken while speaking with Iguruma Kazumi's neighbour, for instance. The truth written down on my notepad only served to bring me pain.

Unfortunately, I simply wasn't built to shoulder that kind of weight. Cases like Iguruma Kazumi's were precisely the sort I wanted no part of. Only an absolute sicko would tie their reason for living and their means of survival together.

"What the fuck? Check that out, Arika. Tsuranui's gotten so bored that she's started kicking at the doors. Three minutes before she breaches the centre line, whatcha say?"

"Youth sure is a wonderful thing, huh? Only God knows where she gets that much energy. It's thirty-freakin'-eight degrees out there. No earthling should even be capable of functioning in this heat. Was our Tsuranui secretly Shikura's strongest character all along?"

I tried asking a slightly unrealistic question.

"....."

"....."

Silence filled the air. I had been hoping for at least a token denial.

In a betrayal of Kirisu's expectations, a single minute was all it took for Tsuranui to kick the door wide open. Apparently, it hadn't even been locked in the first place.

"I've been meaning to ask you. You're the one who made that brown-haired pitcher throw the same course three times, aren't you?"

"Damn it. You noticed, huh?"

"Only after it was over. Did you seriously think I'd buy that crap? You're too goddamn obvious, knucklehead."

"Dude, what's with all the abuse? I've gotten way better at scheming now, y'know?"

There he went again. The fact that he insisted on casting himself as some sort of villain was proof enough that he would remain a hopeless goody-two-shoes until the day he died. There were only three kinds of people in this world—the evil, the upstanding, and the slightly less upstanding.

"Look, she's finally out. That dumbass really loves rumours, doesn't she?"

Tsuranui had fished a ball out from the clubroom and was now playing catch entirely with herself. Apparently, that was supposed to be her attempt at pitching. The fact that she was throwing sidearm only underscored how spectacularly incapable she was of reading the room.

We simply watched her in silence for a few minutes.

"Ah, so that's it. You can practice pitching alone, can't you?"

Suddenly, Kirisu let out a weak mutter, addressed to no one in particular.

"Guess so. What about it?"

"Nah, it's nothing. Watching her just brought me back to my childhood. I forgot why I invited him to play with me in the first place. So that was it all along... This was the only game he could play by himself," Kirisu said absentmindedly.

His gaze followed Tsuranui's silhouette against the dusty field, our conversation coming to a natural close with those words. I had to take back my previous statement. Regrettably enough, Tsuranui was far better at reading the room than she ever let on.

"We've got nothing better to do, huh?"

"Mhm."

It was a familiar midsummer afternoon.

Kirisu sat on the dirt, while I stood watching the clouds towering high above us.

“Well, whaddya say to some baseball?”

The suggestion came so abruptly that I couldn’t shoot it down fast enough. Kirisu stretched his arms out in an exaggerated manner.

“What’s wrong, Arika? You got any better ideas? Look, that dumbass over there’s raring to go.”

Right. A faint, awkward smile found its way onto my face.

“Let’s get this party started. Tsuranui, it’s time for some baseball!”

The moment I called out to her, she bolted back toward the clubroom.

Kirisu rose to his feet leisurely.

“……”

For a split second, I caught a glimpse of an expression I had never seen before on Kirisu’s face.

It was the look of someone watching a departing train vanish into the distance, bound for its final destination.

“You ready? Let’s do this, Kirisu.”

I called out to him, feigning ignorance. In response, he nodded, the usual smug expression returning to his abnormally mature face.

The fact that it was still noon turned out to be a blessing. Whatever sadness I felt within me would vanish when the sun set. Both fleeting joys and inconvenient sorrows held no value to me. Just like that, a memory that should’ve stayed with me forever would become nothing more than another passing moment.

“Hurry up, Senpai! Today’s the day I finally shut that gorilla up for good! By the way, you haven’t told me why you’re moving in with Senpai yet! Watcha doing it for, huh? Personal vendetta? You’re just trying to get under my skin, aren’t you? Whatever it is, I don’t like the sound of it one teeny bit. If you ever swing by my place, you’ve got full permission to throw hands with my rapidly dwindling pack of brothers!”

Tsuranui dumped the gear she’d retrieved from the clubroom into Kirisu’s arms.

I'd spent more than enough time indulging in sentimentality. The tale of our azure memories came to a close here. Now, it was time for the three of us to begin a lively, entirely painless game of baseball.

Needless to say, we already knew exactly who would be standing in the batter's box.

/ S.VS.S.end

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Sinker vs. Slugger had finally come to an end.

The distant clamour of factory machinery swept past the abandoned construction site.

Shards of a shattered mirror lay strewn across the floor.

Having spent every last ounce of his strength, released from the crucible of that overwhelming tension, the batter collapsed the instant the game concluded. He was merely unconscious—there was no threat to his life.

The pitcher, however, folded onto the ground as though his body had finally come apart at the seams. He was still barely conscious, but vitality continued to drain from his frame with every passing moment. To be more precise, it would be fairer to say that his mutation was bleeding the life out of him. The devil in his arm chose to prioritise its own preservation over the survival of its host. An ordinary parasite would never do such a thing, but the creature in question was a devil.

"....."

It was time to see this through. I had passed through the pitcher's side of the hallway and waited for the game to finish from the outside.

Honestly, I couldn't tell if those twenty minutes I spent waiting felt long or short; the point was that it took a tremendous amount of mental fortitude just to put up with it.

My footsteps echoed through the hallway as I walked. With the mirror destroyed, my reflection no longer stared back at me. Everything was as it should be. Being forced to look at myself the entire time would've been exhausting enough—and under circumstances like these, even more so.

"It's you, huh?"

Still sprawled out on the ground, he reacted to the sound of my approach.

He turned toward me with his feeble vision, wondering whether the sun had already set or if the window had simply been shuttered. Behind us, a frightening darkness filled the corridor.

"Better not pass out on me, Iguruma. There'll be no coming back if you fall asleep now. You need to hold on and turn yourself in to the police."

"....."

He didn't reply. In the first place, he had neither the reason nor the energy left to muster one. At this point, death would have been a welcome release for his weary body.

"We made a promise, remember? You'd turn yourself in if you lost. Those were the rules we agreed on."

"It doesn't matter. I—"

"Except it does matter. I ain't about to let you off with something as easy as death. Arishima Shougo—Shimashou was my underclassman. You're gonna have to pay for what you did to him."

The darkness approached, drawing closer with every passing footstep.

Through fading eyes, he watched in a daze, gradually realising that something truly dreadful had entered his vicinity.

"Every single person you took revenge on had their own stories behind them. You don't need the details—just remember that much. Remember, you can't be a kid forever."

The incarnation of loathing unfurled its enormous, misshapen maw.

What was it that spurred devils forth?

The two of us already knew the answer to that question.

A whirlpool of emotion spiralled throughout the hallway. The droplets Iguruma had produced seemed laughably insignificant by comparison.

After all, these sentiments weren't directed solely toward the man lying on the floor; they were the accumulation of a storm that had raged for so long that even its point of origin had become obscure.

Joy and anger.

Sadness and hatred.

I stood there alone—a meagre human being generating a series of electrical impulses fundamentally at odds with one another. The entire time, he simply gazed up at me with his fading vision.

"I still don't get it. Aren't you in pain?"

"Hm?"

My footsteps stopped in their tracks.

I didn't get it. I genuinely had no idea what he was trying to say.

"What do you mean by still?"

"Looking at you scares me."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because… you're more messed up than anyone else."

"How rude," I replied, detaching my prosthetic. Brilliant sunlight spilt into the hallway, as though the window had finally been thrown open.

"Easy there, boy. We're gonna have a problem on our hands if you devour him whole. Look, your favourite food's right over there. I'll go fetch it for you, so just stay put."

My non-existent left hand began to move. Guided by an imaginary sensation, I plucked a tumour resembling an overripe fruit from his body. After giving it a brief sniff, the black dog immediately set about feasting upon it.

In this instance, the excision was performed only after the devil had been forcibly extracted from its host. This was not an exorcism achieved by overcoming the devil within oneself, but a forced expulsion. In the end, I hadn't solved a single problem. Having drawn the shortest straw, all I could do was laugh at myself.

That was the end of my first expulsion—the memory of my very first errand, now long since lost to time.

/ S.VS.S.cut

3. /FOMALHAUT.

Uninterrupted motion is the one and only testament of speed.

▪

No beast could ever hope to keep up with me.
Creatures inherently born with different aptitudes stood no chance within the hunt. After all, they'd forfeited the sole advantage that we were granted.

Futilities running amok within.
Breadths of potential left untapped.
Feeble wills devoid of direction.
A desperate plea to make pace, born of needless chatter.

If my inborn aptitudes dare to deface my own resolve, then the madness it births shall dethrone every gift.

Shortening my time served no fruitful purpose.
No glory waits at the end of such a basis.
No gain lies in rushing past what lies ahead.
All that awaits is a downward plummet after being pinned down.

My heart yearned for a game of chicken, running across the steep precipice of a cliff.
An endless escape to the abyss of death.
Not once easing off the throttle.
Within this isolated extremity, I shall engage the beast whose evolution (acceleration) knows no end.

▪

A bequeathal of blood, flaring at an unchanging temperature.
The blazing Fomalhaut, tinged with unquenchable flames.

/ FOMALHAUT.

1 / Shortly Before (Nov 2004)

Hinomori Shuusei was a modified human being.

Unfortunately, he had never been graced with a title.

He had long hair tinged the colour of ash and always wore a black coat that magnified his presence. Donning the same sunglasses which constantly obscured his eyes, he possessed savage features and a brazen smile that made any who approached him believe they would be torn apart by the long weapon in his hands. There was no one more recognisable than he was, yet he possessed no moniker of his own, no name by which the masses could refer to him when rumours of his existence as a Possessed began making the rounds.

"This doesn't make any sense! How the hell are you still alive?!"

"Hmm."

That was the only reply he could muster to the blood-soaked boy in his late teens.

It all began a brief ten minutes ago, a little after 9:00 PM, in a downtown district still teeming with nightlife. Hinomori Shuusei was walking down the street when he accidentally bumped into a young man and was brought into a tight alley that could barely fit one person. Then, he proceeded to stab the boy several times while musing over what to have for dinner tonight.

"B-But you died two years ago!"

"Hmm..."

Shuusei was certain they'd never met before, yet the poor civilian who fell prey to him appeared quite convinced otherwise.

He tried to make a run for it, but Shuusei's pipe skewered his thigh the moment he twitched his leg.

The martial artist that he was, he had already read his opponent's next move. Under different circumstances, it wouldn't have been unlikely for him to end up as a kendo instructor.

"No, wait! It was three years ago that you died, not two! You fell off the roof of a—hold on! What about that time a year before that?!"

"……"

He fought down the urge to interrogate the boy further, seemingly tired of listening to his clichéd drivel. Hinomori Shuusei clicked his tongue in frustration and yanked his pipe from the boy's leg.

"Must be nice. You've got a real distinct personality, kid," he muttered with venomous envy as he drove the weapon into the boy's left shoulder.

In the next moment, a scream snuck out of the boy's throat. They had drawn a few inquisitive glances from passersby, given their position in the heart of the city, but Shuusei simply waved them off with a curt word.

The sight of a suspicious man in a black coat deterred them from venturing into the alley altogether, leaving the boy obscured by his shadow.

"Things sure have gotten easier. Back in the nineties, some puffed-up college brat would've come running at the sound of you bitching by now. Apathy's capable of both strengthening and weakening people, I guess."

"Y-you…"

"Ah, you were askin' why I'm still alive, right? Y'see, I've been waitin' on that question this whole time. Y'know how every superhero's gotta have a catchphrase? Don't you think it's even more important when you're a villain? Alright, you ready for it? I racked my noodles over this one, so I'm feeling pretty good 'bout it. You wanna know why I'm still alive? It's 'cos I'm immortal. So long as this blood of mine hungers, I shall rise however many times it takes."

"……"

"What, nothing? Ah, figures. To be honest, I kinda felt it was a flop from the get-go. Wouldn't it be nice to have one of those cool-ass lines that lets me transform

the instant I say it? Otherwise, I dunno how much longer I can keep killing people pro bono. Man, when the hell's someone gonna slap a badass name on me?"

"....."

A glint of red threaded through the boy's eyes.

The second Shuusei let his guard down, those sanguine eyes immediately seized the initiative.

"Look into my eyes!"

"Hm?"

A mere 0.1 millimetres thick, the nerves extruded from the boy's eyes stabbed into Hinomori Shuusei. Crawling up his sunglasses like vines, the invisible filaments worked their way into his eyeballs.

"Got ya! Heh, you're done for now!"

Both of their visions were plunged into chaos simultaneously. By hijacking a target's vision and overwriting their memory field, the boy was capable of projecting a fabricated image directly into their sight.

This ability was the reason he was referred to as the Vision Crusher. It was this mutation that had funded the boy's long history of petty crimes. Most of them were convenience store robberies, but his ability allowed him to infiltrate the brain of anyone who met his gaze within fifty centimetres, embedding a permanent image that occupied thirty percent of their field of vision.

The total he'd made off with amounted to only about two million yen, but he'd already destroyed the eyes of eight victims purely for sport. His victims often gouged out their own eyes in a desperate bid to escape the aberrant images, but blindness proved an ineffective remedy, as Crusher's ability operated on the brain itself.

Because of him, there were those left permanently crippled, and those who ended up taking their own lives.

As plain as they may be, such symptoms could only be called the work of a devil. One interference was all it took, and his poison would persist until the victim's brain gave out entirely. But alas—

"Dang, what's with this lewd-ass photo?! You're way too raunchy for a teenager. Only a kid'd get all worked up over a snuff scene like this! Oh wait, I guess you are a

kid. Oughta learn some manners, man. Still, I wouldn't want to put this to waste, so I'll just keep it at the back of my head. Eh, no biggie. Even if it's imprinted onto my mind, I can just keep it outta my sight. See? Works just like a phone!"

"Wh-what the hell?!"

The boy's eyes opened wide in shock, unable to comprehend what he had just heard.

Shuusei had claimed he would simply ignore it—ignore a foreign image burned permanently into his consciousness. Something was terribly wrong with him. The boy would've accepted it if Shuusei possessed some new function that allowed him to counteract Crusher's, but for him to claim to be capable of simply enduring it...

"You're sick in the head! This is when you're supposed to writhe in suffering! Doesn't it gross you out?!"

"No need to be so rude. I'm just puttin' up with it here. You ever hear that saying? In for a penny, in for a pound. Sometimes ya just gotta wait the poison out, y'feel me?"

"It's not that simple, dumbass! The only way to withstand poison is to have resistance to it! Only someone who had it within them from the start can survive! But you don't have shit! You took a lethal dose with zero resistance, and yet you're still alive! Don't you get it?! There's nothing left for you after death!"

"Darn, you make a really good point. It's like the difference between the walking dead and the living dead. Wait, did I get things mixed up? Man, who gives a shit anyway? Anyway, you really overdid it this time. Went right past 18+ and straight inta 25+ territory. Take it from an old man: get used to this kinda shit as a teen, and ten years from now you'll either be crippled or a career criminal. Oh, but then again—"

His lips curved into a smile, baring a row of sharp fangs that brought a beast to mind.

A chilling dread radiated from the weapon embedded in his shoulder.

"Unfortunately, ya don't got a single minute left."

A split second later, his cries echoed throughout the night.

It was a horrifying howl of agony. As opposed to the earlier scream he let out in fear of pain, this was the wail of a man who could feel death closing in on him. At this point, even an apathetic civilian couldn't turn a blind eye. As the passersby were finally seized by a belated sense of civic duty and ventured into the alley, all that awaited them was a corpse that appeared as though it'd just emerged from a smoker.

Despite being littered with gashes and stab wounds, not a single drop of blood leaked from the body.

◆

"I really couldn't care less. But you do know you're an absolute moron, right?"

They stood twenty metres above the crime scene, atop the rooftop of a shared residence.

Awaiting him there, after he had bounded up the building's walls like a deer, was a woman who appeared to be in her twenties. She wore a hunting cap reminiscent of a detective's and a pair of glasses with oversized frames. Her build was somewhat broad for a woman, an impression further accentuated by the beige, high-collar trench coat wrapped about her frame.

"Hmm, I'm well aware of that. But damn, it hits different when comin' from someone else's mouth. Oh, and it stings especially bad when I can hear a trace of pity and contempt in it. By the way, who was that first part aimed at? The kid, or my performance?"

"Both, actually. At this point, I've gotten used to your unfortunate targets and the conspicuous ways you choose to dispose of them. Besides, I'd lose my mind if I let it bother me every single time. You done here? If so, I'm leaving. I'll get in touch once I find another prospect."

"I'm countin' on ya. Where are you staying right now, Maki? How many hideouts do you have?"

"Three, at the moment. One in Nouzu, a fleapit dorm in Shikura's industrial district, and, last of all, an apartment near the police station so that I can eavesdrop on 'em. I've also rigged things so I can keep up to three faces in reserve at once."

"I see. Guess that means you haven't been around Shikura Hills, eh? Think you can sniff out that girl I mentioned?"

"Should be able to draw her out soon enough. She's only been targeting men over thirty. Dunno what her angle is, but she goes about it like some sorta hunt. Things would be way easier if my ability worked on men."

"Oh? So ya can only wear women's skins?"

"For now, at least. You sure about this, Shuusei? Based on what I saw, I'm fairly certain she's stronger than you. I can't picture you walking away from a fight to the death with her."

"Interesting. Hearing that's only getting' me more excited," he said with a self-mocking smirk.

With his usual levity tucked out of sight, his inborn cruelty bared its teeth.

"Colour me surprised. You trust my judgement? Weren't you the one who said I wasn't even worth killing? That my scent didn't tempt you, and that I had no appeal as a woman?"

"And that's exactly why ya oughta thank your lucky stars. I only let ya walk away 'cause you didn't whet my appetite. Besides, what does a lack of appeal have to do with that machine-like perception of yours? Ain't no second-guessin' those eyes. C'mon, shoot straight with me. First thing that crossed your mind after running into me was that I was weak enough for you to kill, wasn't it?"

"That's..."

"Don't sweat it, things would've ended up like that eventually anyway. There aren't too many Possessed out there capable of arriving at that conclusion, y'know? Most of them just run away, or they charge at me without ever realisin'. You've always been right, Maki. And if that's what your eyes tell you, then I don't doubt for a second that my target bests me."

"But you're still going to try and kill her? What, decided to start playing hunter yourself? Let your guard down, and you may just find yourself becoming the hunted."

"We'll just have to wait and see. Y'see, her hunts are about giving herself satisfaction. Mine are an obligation. There's a world of difference between 'em. By the way, Maki..."

"What? You'd better not waste my time. I've got way more problems on my hands than you, Shuusei."

"Aw, don't get all sulky on me. You playin' the strait-laced character tonight or something? Ugh, I'm so jelly! If only I had a 2P and 3P colour of my own. It just don't make any sense. Been racking up all this damage, and they still won't slap one of those killer nicknames on me."

"What do you mean? They were calling you a vampire two years ago, weren't they? Those rumours are still making the rounds."

"That, eh? Ain't like it's true, anyway. 'Sides, that's way too plain for my tastes. I want them to think real nice and hard about it. Take your eyes off the wheel for one second and it's straight inta dumbass country."

"Looks like you're already there, though. But I suppose you do have a point. Calling you that is a tad too tame, considering how gaudy your whole get-up is."

In response, he could only shrug his shoulders in resignation.

Hinomori Shuusei—no other Possessed had eluded arrest for as long as he had, and he also held the record for the highest number of crimes committed by a single individual.

Though he was, beyond question, a uniquely heinous criminal, he had yet to graduate into a proper urban legend.

"Maybe I just don't got enough charm."

"On the other hand, I'm pretty sure you have enough stupidity. I should get going soon. My neighbours might start suspecting me if I stay out too late."

Face buried behind her collar, the woman in glasses made for the exit. Unlike Shuusei, she did not appear to possess the same superhuman physicality.

"Oh, there's something I've been meaning to ask too. Hinomori Shuusei, that last victim was the sixth to claim you were dead."

"Indeed he was. What 'bout it?"

"Nothing much. Even a fifteen-year-old would've had a chance or two to hear about you, so I couldn't care less about that part. Whether you died however many years ago doesn't matter to me either. For that matter, I'm pretty sure death wouldn't be enough to stop you anyway."

"Righto. So what're you getting at?"

"There's just one thing bothering me. Children, adults, men, and women. How could six people with no connection to each other all end up saying the same thing?"

Only the wind cut through the silence between them.

One stood at the rooftop's edge, while the other had halted before the door at the far end. With ten metres between them, each studied the other's expression.

"Who knows? Maybe your info's just gone stale. Believe it or not, this old dude here's kinda a big deal. Might not know it, seein' as you were holed up in Origa the whole time, but ask around for the strongest Possessed and a good chunk of folks'll point at yours truly. Wouldn't be too strange if word reached 'em that way."

"Speaking of that, you really don't know anything about what happens inside Origa, do you? You? The strongest Possessed? Don't make me laugh."

With her back turned to Shuusei, she placed her hand on the doorknob. As she left—

"Thanks for helping me out tonight. Still, I'd watch my step if I were you. The feds ain't the only thing worth keepin' an eye on. Don't put too much stock in those faces of yours while you're out investigating. I'd really hate to have you as an enemy, y'know? After all, you'd be one helluva pain to hunt down."

In his usual carefree tone, the vampire tossed one final remark her way.

▪

In February 2003, just under two years ago, Hinomori Shuusei was apprehended in Kareno, a city situated in the far south of C Prefecture. Rumoured to be Shikura City's very first Possessed, he was a serial killer whose tally of victims had already climbed past twenty.

After being diagnosed with Agonist Disorder in 1995, he was admitted to Kinui General Hospital. Following three years of treatment at the facility, he absconded midway through his transfer to Origa Memorial Hospital.

It would take until the beginning of 1999 for him to surface again as the prime suspect in the attempted Karenozawa Group Suicide, a reemergence that ultimately culminated in his arrest by the Kareno City Police Force in 2003.

He escaped once more during a subsequent transport to Origa Memorial Hospital, incapacitating Officer Tougo Kisara and murdering two of the drivers assigned to the convoy. With his whereabouts lost yet again, Hinomori Shuusei continued to evade justice.

However, one driver testified to the strong likelihood of his death. Positioned toward the rear, he had witnessed the entire sequence unfold from ten metres away.

Shortly after the escort vehicle came to a halt, two shots were discharged from within. Hinomori Shuusei then staggered out of the vehicle, only to pitch over the side after a third gunshot.

The vehicle had stopped atop a bridge, and the suspect never resurfaced from the river below after his fall. Though a search was conducted across the surrounding vicinity, it failed to yield any noteworthy evidence. Conversely, Tougo testified that the suspect had survived, prompting the police to extend their already-fruitless manhunt to his hometown of Shikura City, in the northern reaches of C Prefecture.

Half a year later, the task force was dissolved. With his survival left unresolved, the police continued their search for Hinomori Shuusei, but they could no longer commit anything approaching their former manpower to the case. For all intents and purposes, the matter was entered into the records as a cold case.

It would take until August of 2004 for the elusive serial killer to be sighted in C Prefecture once again.

His survival was confirmed in the wake of a traffic accident on a bypass; however, no substantive interdepartmental cooperation took shape beyond Kareno City's disclosure of its prior investigation files.

While the Shikura City police force formed a task force with the stated aim of arresting him, the recurrent mass suicides that began in October meant they could only spare twenty officers from the precincts and two from headquarters.

The Kareno City police force, meanwhile, lodged strenuous objections to what they deemed a gross lack of urgency, but those complaints were ultimately dismissed.

▪

There was a reason Ishizue Arika never strayed beyond the city. He always preferred to stay indoors, and the fact that his employer, Karyou Kaie, never left the confines of his home meant there was never any real need for him to leave Shikura.

Thus, even if he were ever made the subject of a documentary, most of it would have taken place inside his apartment. That was why Hinomori Shuusei referred to him as a lazy bum: to a man who had roamed C Prefecture from end to end, such a lack of wanderlust must have looked almost grotesque.

C Prefecture was relatively large, spanning an area of five thousand square kilometres. With sixty cities and a population of six million, it was a flat expanse of land nestled within eastern Kanto. Shikura City was located in the far north, slightly to the east. Boasting the only international airport in C Prefecture, its position just two hours from the city centre made real estate in the area highly desirable. Fields took over the landscape as one drew closer to the airport, giving the surroundings a provincial cast, but several cities, Shikura included, were steadily being dragged into modernity. The development rate of its cities sat dead in the middle—less than Tokyo's twenty-three wards, yet more advanced than your average provincial town.

In plainer terms, the eastern side, where the airport stood, was a spread of mountains and cultivated land, while the western side was where metropolitan development had been allowed to take root. There was a famous shrine near the airport whose deity was said to bring good fortune, drawing around two million visitors at the beginning of every year. It was one of the rare places on the planet where one could witness a horde of people stampeding as though they had been turned loose from hell.

Outside the holiday season, however, it was an otherwise unremarkable hot spring town. One day, Touma Mato, her fellow inspector, and Ishizue Arika would go on to solve a bizarre case while staying at a nearby inn. This investigation would

eventually lead to Ishizue Arika's discovery of the ever-mysterious Touma Mato's true identity and nature, but that's a story for another time.

Tonight's stage was set in the far west of C Prefecture, well away from Shikura's city centre.

It was 11:00 PM on an iron bridge built over the river that separated the prefecture from the metropolis.

High upon the iron arch, where the girders spun out like a spider's web, Hinomori Shuusei stood with a katana in hand. Meanwhile, ten metres away, a human-sized beast lay ready to pounce. She was a woman with long black hair, clinging to the scaffolding by all four limbs and boring into her prey with gleaming eyes. The term 'human-sized beast' was no more than a metaphor. More precisely, she was a human recast in the image of a beast.

The crown of the bridge rose forty metres above the ground, and each of them stood upon an iron frame no more than forty centimetres wide.

A strong gale buffeted the structure, threatening to knock them down onto the tracks below or send them plunging into the river beneath.

With his usual long hair and black coat, Hinomori Shuusei's body was covered in scratches. His black coat had been slashed open as though he had scuffled with a giant cat. Had those wounds sunk a mere three centimetres deeper, he would have bled out where he stood.

In stark contrast, the beast crouching on all fours bore not a single mark. She kept him pinned beneath her predatory stare, waiting for the perfect opportunity to bring down her claws.

"Uh-oh, this ain't good. Maki was right. I might be toast."

Was he merely putting on a show, or was the peril of the situation beginning to sing to him?

With a crooked grin tugging at his lips, Hinomori Shuusei shifted his grip on the katana.

At that exact moment, the quadrupedal beast sprang into the darkness.

Leaping wildly through the maze of iron bars, she closed the distance.

Loosing a howl, she readied herself at last to shred her defenceless prey into ribbons.

"Whoops."

As the beast charged at him hither and thither, Shuusei endured her onslaught without his feet ever leaving the iron bar they were planted on.

Avoiding her assault whenever he could, he spent an arm, a shoulder, or whatever piece of himself he had to, shaving the wounds down from fatal to survivable. Whenever the smallest opening showed itself, he lashed out with his katana and cut the beast's momentum short.

Shuusei was but a single point on the bridge, faced with linear barrages from all directions.

Anyone could tell he was being pushed back; it was only a matter of time now before this one-sided hunt came to a close.

Yet for some reason, the situation dragged on for nearly five minutes.

"Kh...!"

The beast finally let its voice break through. It was the voice of a human girl, and a rather captivating one at that. Kicking off from her perch, she went for his head.

"How 'bout this?"

He avoided her claws by a hair's breadth. Quite literally, a single hair was all that separated him from death. It was nothing short of a miracle, the sort of impossible reprieve a person ought to exhaust only once in an entire lifetime.

The problem was that Hinomori Shuusei could keep pulling off such maneuvers as freely as breathing.

"'Bout time you kicked things up a notch. What speed are ya at right now? Sixty percent? You're lettin' those gifts of yours rot on the vine. You tired of living or something? That what's holdin' back your acceleration? Even after gettin' your paws on a body that perfect, your mind still can't keep up with it. Those eyes of yours've already gone lights-out, lady."

"Tch...!"

Her assault heightened with every passing second.

Realising a single arm wasn't gonna cut it, Shuusei shifted to a two-handed grip and continued threading himself through death by the width of a hair.

It had been clear from the get-go that he would be forced onto the defensive; after all, he wasn't capable of the same acrobatics as his foe. While he could attempt to imitate her, his speed, accuracy, and power all fell short of the beast's. Because of that, he elected against challenging her on the same playing field. To begin with, he had never intended to stake the fight on a contest of aptitudes.

Those thirty seconds stretched on and on, as though time itself had stopped, even as the vibrations from passing trains coursed through the bridge.

Landing five metres away, the beast writhed in a fit of frustrated bloodlust, furious that she had failed once again to eviscerate her prey.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!"

Between laboured breaths, she flung out a desperate, earnest question. At that moment, the simple act of voicing her thoughts seemed to cost her dearly.

"Hm, me? Y'see, I'm—"

Shuusei tilted his head quizzically, unable to come up with an answer.

Tonight's stage belonged to early November, when everything had begun to seethe toward the boiling point. After his kindly collaborator helped him pin down his target's location, Shuusei had immediately laid a trap to lure her out. His goal was to pit himself against her in a deathmatch, so there was no longer any need to spell that part out. In that sense, the girl already knew what his purpose was.

"Hmm. Hang on a sec, lemme think."

Shuusei simply stood there, unable to come up with a proper tagline.

It was far too late to introduce himself now, and he doubted that calling himself an immortal vampire would quite hit the mark either. As much as he wanted to use the catchphrase he had come up with recently, the girl before him knew nothing of the countless deaths he had crawled back from in the past.

"We can come back to that later. I oughta be asking you the same thing, though. Somebody told me the other day it's bad manners to ask someone's name before givin' your own."

In an attempt to cover up his anguish, Shuusei shunted the conversation elsewhere.

"I'm… a lawnmower."

She pronounced the words with the vehemence of a prayer.

"A beast in the form of a lawnmower."

Her will gave form to her words, moulding them into sharp fangs.

"Are you shitting me?"

Shuusei finally learned what it felt like to have the scales fall from his eyes.

This would be the first and last time he ever showed respect to one of his Possessed targets.

He desperately resisted the urge to fall to his knees in defeat.

Of course, a lawnmower! How could he have been so naive? Indeed, her claws were in fact weapons that sliced apart anything they snagged on. Their viciousness was beyond dispute, calling to mind a fan whose blades had been replaced with knives. It all made so much more sense now. Although what she mowed down was human flesh rather than grass, the sheer audacity of the comparison made it no less fitting.

To make matters worse, her delivery had been just as splendid. It was a simple phrase, yet there was immense willpower behind it. On the other hand—

It's because I'm immortal. As long as this blood of mine hungers, I shall rise as many times as it takes.

That string of words were all that Hinomori Shuusei's greatest efforts had managed to produce.

"Gaaahhhhhh! Why does living have to be so painful?!"

Shuusei continued to flail in agony.

The world was cruel. The world was so, so cruel. He wanted to disappear off the face of the earth. To just bury his corpse in a hole—and throw another dozen more

in while he was at it. Meaning another dozen of himself, of course. Then seal it off forever and let himself be forgotten as an urban legend. For a man who engaged in murder as a pastime, such humiliation amounted to a mental defeat unlike anything he had ever suffered.

"Damn it all! What the hell's this feeling? Is this... jealousy?"

In the next instant, Shuusei dashed—no, burst forth.

"Gh?!"

The girl kicked herself out of his path at once.

At a speed beyond anything he had shown her before, her defenceless prey bared his fangs in the blink of an eye. Only the hunting instincts she had tempered over the past two years allowed her to feel the danger closing in before it reached her.

Unfortunately, her reaction was a split second too slow. No, if anything, her prey had stolen that split second out from under her.

Their two shadows locked together in midair.

In the instant before her claws found their mark, Shuusei had already bridged the gap.

A bizarre sensation crept into her mind. She had reacted to similar speeds countless times in the past. Despite that, he had unmistakably slipped through her guard just now. Something was wrong; the very inception of this man's speed was different from hers.

Before she could arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, her claws raked toward the prey rushing in on her. Yet once again, they were fended off by his katana at a hair's breadth.

In the next moment, the vampire's shoulder crashed into her, close enough that it almost looked like an embrace—near enough for him to sink his teeth into her neck. However, such an act was the forte of a beast. Before the so-called vampire could bite first, the beast's fangs went for his throat.

"Kya?!"

But her counterattack was cut off by a kick driven straight into her chest.

Bending his knees and pivoting around, Shuusei had launched a roundhouse kick with the force of a rocket.

Knocked far away from the bridge, the girl crashed into the river below them. Still caught in the follow-through of the strike, he watched her fall the whole way.

"Aw, crap. I can't get back either."

He had thrown himself too far backward in pursuit of her.

And just like that, Hinomori Shuusei dropped into the dark river as well.

◆

"Not that it's any of my business. But you do realise you're a dimwit with some serious delusions of grandeur, right?"

They stood on the riverbank, far below the iron bridge.

When Shuusei dragged himself out of the water, the woman he called Maki was already lying in wait. She possessed a completely different atmosphere compared to before. Her hair had been dyed red, her ears were pierced, and she sported a black leather jacket with jeans. Even her physique had been subtly reworked, enough to leave the impression of a young man rather than a woman.

"Here, a towel. I figured you'd wash up looking like this."

Shuusei began wringing the river out of his drenched hair.

There were no witnesses, given how late it was, but residents from the neighbourhood passed through this area often enough. Had anyone been unfortunate enough to stumble across them, they would most likely have met with an even greater misfortune. In truth, this riverbed, usually home to peaceful weekend baseball games, was balanced on a rather delicate edge tonight.

"She fled to the opposite side. You gonna go after her?"

"Nah, I'm done with Tsukiri. Thought I'd hit the jackpot at first, but I've run across her type before."

"I see. What a waste of effort."

"Still, I made decent progress. That's one suspect scratched off the list. Now that I'm fresh out of candidates, I can finally get back to my real job."

"I'm talking about me. I went through all that trouble to track her down for you, and you let her off with a kick? Looking at her pisses me off. For some reason, it

feels like she's always looking down on me. Well, whatever. By the way, Shuusei… Her name isn't Tsukiri."

"Huh? For real? Her name's got two 'moon' kanji sittin' side by side, then the kanji for 'village'. How the hell ain't that Tsuki-ri?"

"It's read Tomori. You know how the surname Takanashi doesn't use the kanji for 'hawk' and 'nothing', even though that's what the name means? It's written with the characters for 'small', 'bird', and 'play', since there would be no hawks in a mountain where small birds play. In her case, the surname is written with the characters for 'moon', 'see', and 'village'. A village so flat you can see the moon. Hence Yamanashi, meaning 'no mountains'."

"Hmm. That don't resemble no sound effect at all."

He nodded in silence, finally realising why his search had turned up nothing.

"Well, thanks for the info. It really is a shame, though. I won't have anything to ask you for in the meantime. What're you gonna do now? You stayin' in Shikura? Ever thought about touring the country? There aren't many Possessed who can slip out of the prefecture like you."

"Pass. I'm perfectly fine here. It's not like anyone can find me."

"Oh-ho, did you fall in love or something?"

"Ugh, shut up! That's none of your business! And what about you? You don't have any reason to stick around Shikura anymore. Why don't you screw back off to the south?"

"Y'see, turns out Shikura's exactly where I oughta be. Remember how I said I was workin' my main gig while lookin' for Tsukiri? Hit bingo on that front. Oh, an' I made a friend here too. Shady-li'l bastard, but he's got a good head on his shoulders. Even when he sees the whole picture, he's smart enough to pretend he only caught half. Trust me, the guy's reliable as they come—wait, why don't I just ask him to come up with a nickname for me? Man, friends're great! Anyway, that's why I'll be watchin' over Shikura's peace an' order for the foreseeable future," he said, giving her a slap on the back.

Meanwhile, a civilian stared at them curiously as they walked along the riverbank.

Perhaps a correction was in order: since there was no possible way to see them as anything but a pair of empty-headed rockers, no ordinary civilian would rush to report them to the police, no matter how inherently suspicious they appeared.

"Ew. What kinda freak would befriend you, anyway? Is he even human? Nobody with a sound mind would put up with you without losing theirs."

"Heh, this world's full of folks out there you couldn't've imagined in a million years. This is goodbye, Maki. I'll reach out if I need your help with somethin'."

Leaving her behind, Shuusei cut across the riverbank.

That was the entire truth behind the small quarrel between Possessed that took place in early November, with no witnesses to tell the tale.

Just like that, the two serial killers crossed paths and went their separate ways, leaving behind a thin thread known only to themselves.

Two months later, at 4:00 PM on December 31st, Yamanashi Tomori would go on to be formally hunted by Touma Mato—but that conclusion was no longer of any interest to Hinomori Shuusei.

◆

"Sheesh, that was way too close. Woulda been screwed six ways to Sunday if we'd fought on the ground. Ain't no way I coulda muscled past her if she'd come straight at me. Gotta hand it to pure-blooded Possessed; they really are something else."

After parting ways with Maki, Hinomori Shuusei walked the midnight highway on his lonesome.

The street was dead silent, broken only by the occasional cluster of cars racing past every two minutes, just as one might expect at 1:00 AM.

"Now, where do I wanna crash tonight? It's gotten a little too cold to keep roughing it outdoors."

He worked out the knots in his shoulders with his free hand, while his other carried the bag containing his weapon.

Plodding through the streets, he was enveloped by the lazy air, letting his guard down completely. It was a natural reaction. To a martial artist like him, it took until the end of a duel to finally be freed from the tension.

Possessed or otherwise, a brief window of recovery was an unavoidable step in getting one's edge back. To prepare for the next battle—for whatever new challenge came his way—a proper measure of rest was indispensable.

As he eased back into everyday life, the weight lifting from his shoulders, disaster struck within that unavoidable gap.

"Maybe I should do the usual and break into some random house. Kinda crazy how easy it is to crash in somebody's living room without 'em noticin'. Though sometimes, the missus wakes up early an' I wind up—"

A merciless impact ran through his back. As he was cheerfully leafing through his past blunders, Hinomori Shuusei was scooped off his feet and hurled into the air.

It was a sudden accident.

For some reason, a car cruising at over 60 kilometres per hour had ploughed straight into him. After striking the hood with enough force to snap both legs, he slammed into the windshield before cartwheeling over the roof and hitting the pavement.

Battered from metal to glass to road like a trash bag afloat, his empty husk lay motionless on the street. Anyone could tell he had died on impact. For all his experience, a spontaneous traffic accident left no room for it to matter. Except, the situation was far more dire than it seemed.

"Hinomori!"

After all, this was no accident.

The door of the car that had rear-ended him swung open. Rather than rushing to the victim's aid, the driver drew an S&W handgun and unloaded the magazine into him.

Apparently, they were set on leaving no room for doubt about his demise.

Needless to say, his lifeless body was unable to avoid even a single bullet. To begin with, surviving the initial impact had been a long shot in itself.

Slamming the door shut, the driver stamped down on the gas and fled.

One minute was all it took from start to finish. Upon witnessing the crime, a convenience store clerk abandoned the pot of oden he had been meticulously seasoning—in other words, decanting pre-made soup into—and rushed to contact the authorities.

When they arrived ten minutes later, all that remained were the pockmarks the bullets had left behind, and a dark bloodstain whose owner's existence was vouched for by a single, bewildered witness.

2 / R.HF (Interlude - Ishizue Arika)

▪

"A! Ri! Kaaa! It's me! I'm here to play!"

"....."

It was a certain night at the beginning of December.

As always, Shuusei showed up at my apartment despite the minor detail that I'd never once invited him over.

"I'm coming in!"

A normal person would've used the door. So naturally, he made his way in via window.

My apartment was on the fourth floor of the welfare facility, so it went without saying that the window sat over ten metres up a sheer wall. There was no veranda nor any protrusions that could pass off as improvised footholds. Yet, for some godforsaken reason, he could waltz in through the window whenever he pleased.

The first time it happened, he'd made his grand entrance by crashing straight through the glass and the iron bars fitted there to prevent suicide attempts. Calling this breaking and entering felt almost too generous; it had already crossed the line into an unadulterated act of domestic terrorism.

"Getting kinda cold out these days, huh? Oh, the window? Want me to keep it open for some fresh air? Or that too chilly for ya?"

"Shut it, please. And kindly get outta my house."

"Man, don't be such a downer. Is that any way to treat someone who came with some goodies in hand? I've been workin' my ass off lately, man. Give me a minute to cool down 'fore you start biting my head off like that."

With that, the man in the black coat splayed himself across my sofa. This asshole did, as a matter of course, things even the most feral high school boy on a class trip would think twice about.

"Except you haven't been working. The only thing I've ever seen you do is mess around. Can't really call that being a hard worker, you know? Anyway, what did you get me?"

"Y'know, dude. That thing you brought up the other day. Like uh, one of those trumpets a kid stares at in a shop window while sucking their thumb... Or wait, a signed first-print CD from some washed-up voice actress? Nah, more like when you blow all your money on a sword-shaped guitar from Yahoo Auctions 'cos you're young and stupid, and then it turns out it doesn't function as either a sword or a guitar. You get what I'm saying? Something sad and useless."

Right, that settled it. There was something seriously wrong with this guy's head.

"I'm guessing it isn't food, then. Something old and useless, huh? Hm... hang on, is it a map of Torinonori from twenty years ago?"

"That's it. No idea why, but you can't find the damn thing anywhere anymore. Hadda ask an acquaintance of mine to shake a few trees for me. But get a load of this, turns out she'd been hunting for it herself. When I told her I was after a map from the eighties, she said she already had one sitting around. Maybe she's some kinda map freak or something. Who knows? Anyway, here ya go, bruddah. Sorry, but a copy's the best I could do."

I quickly snatched the photocopied map from his hands.

It was a single sheet of A5 paper, but there was plenty to pore over. Just as I expected, it differed plenty from the present day.

"So the estate used to be this huge, huh? Looks like there were even other people living around the area back then. But how'd all of that end up turning into woodland?"

"You talkin' about that forest out on the outskirts? Heard the place used to be home to some real blue-bloods. Every house 'round there belonged to their relatives an' servants. There was some weird-ass rule, too. They'd only hire folks whose surnames had animal kanji in 'em. Like 'bird', 'fish,' that sorta thing. Guess they had a thing against humans, eh?" he said, letting out a hearty laugh.

Unfortunately, the copy didn't have that much information listed on it.

Even so, Karyou Manor's footprint reminded me of another map I'd seen somewhere before. Present-day maps listed the mansion as nothing more than a single

private property, but this one sketched out the rough locations of both the main building and its various annexes.

What's more, the underground room where Karyou Kaie was now holed up had apparently once belonged to an outbuilding—a freestanding, cellar-like structure removed from the main estate.

But that was about as far as the map took me. If I wanted to dig any deeper, I'd have to track down someone who'd actually been around back then.

But I think I'd call it a day there. I was merely curious about what the old Karyou Manor looked like to begin with; there was no need for me to dive into a full-blown investigation. Not for the time being, at any rate.

"Well? How've things been? Heard things got pretty dicey over at Nouzu."

Rich, coming from the diciest man in all of C Prefecture.

I first met Hinomori Shuusei in August, but it took me until the start of September to realise he was a highly wanted murderer.

For a while, I had been wondering why the local police station had what looked like a rock band poster plastered on the wall. At first, I figured the music guys were either declaring war on law enforcement, or maybe they were finally trying to extend an olive branch. Either way, a pretty bold move, right? It wasn't until I leaned in for a closer look that I realised it was Shuusei's wanted poster.

Honestly, he'd been barging into my room to shoot the breeze long before I found out, so suddenly kicking him out after all this time didn't sit right with me. Besides, I finally realised why he was out there killing people during the subway incident back in November, which meant it was already far too late to chase him off anyway.

"Nouzu Industrial Complex's getting more and more isolated. People are getting jumped in the streets on a daily basis now, so most residents won't even set foot outside. You know how people there can live entirely within the complex, right? The supply trucks and shuttle buses running between the industrial park and the factories cover pretty much everything they need. Oh, and they've got squad cars posted at every entrance now, too. Based on what I saw, they're practically running border control."

"Damn, that sounds rough. Nouzu Industrial Complex was built on top of a hill, so there's only one large highway leading to it. And now you're tellin' me they sealed the place off? Interesting. Looks like we've got ourselves a modern-day fortress on our hands."

Sprawled out on my sofa, Shuusei had an ominous smile playing about his lips.

It was near the end of September when things had started to go sideways over at the Nouzu Industrial Complex.

Unfounded rumours that every last resident was a Possessed had begun making the rounds, stoking a groundswell of discrimination against them. By December, those same rumours had only gained further traction.

It had started within Nouzu—an extension of a rumour claiming a certain apartment's residents all shared the exact same face—but it had now grown to the point where it wrapped up the entire population.

"Hasn't Nouzu always been home to similar rumours? Why'd shit hit the fan this time?"

"Probably because the neighbouring towns got caught in the crossfire. Every rumour before this started and died inside Nouzu. Since it never spilt into anyone else's backyard, nobody saw fit to make a big deal of it. Until recently, that is."

"Ah, that makes sense. Boy, you sure are sharp."

He kept rolling back and forth on top of my sofa. For some reason, even his ridiculous sofa-rolling possessed the fluid smoothness of a black panther.

"Hold up, where'd Kirisu go?"

Realising Kirisu's absence after all this time, the black panther craned his neck to peek into the neighbouring room.

"He's out today. Said he's shacking up with some random chick tonight. Probably needs someone to foot the dinner bill for his broke ass."

"Ooh-la-la. Lemme tell ya, kiddo, that kind of 'dinner' ain't something money can buy. Hmm, I can't say I approve of how fancy-free he's 'bout it, though. Is Kirisu some kind of womaniser?"

"Nah, not really. If anything, I think he takes things pretty seriously. He does tend to get attached easily, though. I'm pretty sure he'll go for anyone as long as she's cute."

"Dang, now that's what you call a man."

"Guess so. But it also means he's never truly fallen in love. His affection's more like a multi-target laser than a raygun. He likes everyone, but he's never found someone who can get him completely smitten."

As his old friend, I wouldn't mind helping out if he ever found the right woman for him. Guys like him turned into entirely different people once they went into family-man mode. After all, no one else had a more reliable back than him when push came to shove.

"I see, I see. How 'boutcha, kiddo? Got a girl yourself?"

"It's complicated. I kinda do, kinda don't. If you don't mind sitting through some gloating, I can tell you about it."

"Real tempting offer, but not tonight. Hearing your story's probably gonna give me some serious heartburn. For the life of me, I can't think of a good reason why a guy who's always scowlin' would suddenly be walkin' 'round with a shit-eating grin. What's with this happy-ending aura, darn it! You'd better not tell me you've already crossed the finish line! Shit, what kinda lovey-dovey finale are you planning to torture me with?!"

Shuusei's black coat continued flopping around on the sofa.

He looked pretty happy despite his vocal displeasure, so I guess that meant he was having fun.

"Yeah, yeah. Make sure you tidy up before you leave, alright? What about you, Shuusei? Your stupidness aside, you'd do good enough by keeping your mouth shut."

"Hmm."

And just like that, my Hinomori Shuusei Flail-n-Go toy went dead, as if its spring had conked out. After that, he proceeded to give his back a good stretch.

"I ain't interested in 3D girls."

However, he wasn't done yet.

"Actually, I ain't interested in girls, period!"

Having hollered those words out, he rolled back over to face the wall.

"Well, whatever you say."

"Now hold your horses there, lad. Whatever for are you trying to move your chair into the corner of the room?"

"The last thing I wanna catch is whatever you've got. Seriously, what are you even doing here?" I asked, fixing him with a glare.

As his expression tightened, Shuusei switched from lying around to sitting cross-legged on the sofa.

"Keen as ever, boss. Truth is, I need to consult you 'bout something."

Apparently, he was serious this time.

This had nothing to do with the current topic, but what he meant when he said he wasn't interested in women was something else entirely. Turns out, if anyone was going to get heartburn here, it was me. This guy was so utterly devoted to one particular woman that every other person on earth had ceased to exist to him as a romantic prospect altogether.

Anyway, Hinomori Shuusei's request turned out to be another spectacular waste of time.

"You want... a nickname?"

"Exactly! I figured someone like you could cook up something real cool."

The weirdo in question was staring at me bright-eyed and expectant.

According to him, he had always wanted a catchphrase of his own, but a recent run-in with a Possessed who had some genuinely 'banger lines' got him craving a legendary moniker.

"....."

To be honest, even though I had wallowed in my own misfortune countless times before, tonight I skipped mourning altogether and went straight to acceptance. It was already midnight. In what world did some shady lunatic break into your apartment to rope you into a brainstorming session at this godforsaken hour?

But rather than waste my breath complaining, I figured I was better off coming up with a good nickname and getting him out of my apartment as soon as possible. Indeed, I had attained enlightenment.

"Don't people already call you an immortal vampire or something? Is that not enough for you? Sounds plenty good to me."

"Makes me sound kinda wimpy, though. I don't want something so wishy-washy. It's gotta be more specific. Y'know, like some sort of alias."

An alias, huh? So he was after some sort of pseudonym.

"Hm, then how does Eviscerator sound? Doesn't it feel kinda strong?"

"Wh-what the?! Howdja come up with something that badass right off the bat?! But still, I want you to take it in a different direction. Countin' on ya, boss!"

"A different direction?"

He was being awfully demanding for someone who hadn't managed to come up with a single idea on his own.

Basically, he didn't want anything that sounded like a typical person's moniker.

Hence, my only choice now was to come up with something that represented Shuusei's specific traits.

"Hold on, let me think. If we're going off your appearance, then it's gotta be that black coat. Oh, right. There's something I've been meaning to ask. How do you stop yourself from dying?"

Hinomori Shuusei was an immortal vampire.

That was how both he and those around him tended to describe him, and it wasn't all that far off the mark. No matter how dire the straits he found himself in, he'd come back the next day as if nothing had even happened. Perhaps immortal was overselling it, but his extraordinary resilience was beyond dispute.

"Whaddya mean? I die like any other person, y'know? How'm I supposed to walk away after gettin' my heart ripped out or my head lopped off? Wait, I think I see where you're going with this. For the record, being 'unkillable' and being 'undead' are two entirely different things, right? Alright! I've decided to tell you, and you alone, the truth. All I do is make sure I come out alive. Simple as that."

"The hell?"

He had somehow made it even less clear. It sounded like he was spouting off about the indomitable human spirit or some crap, except in his case, he'd actually gone and made it real.

When he got mowed down by a train and his flesh scattered across the tracks, I nearly had a heart attack watching him turn up nonchalantly outside my window the very next day.

"Do you still not get it? I'm indestructible, not immortal. You can be undying without being immortal, y'know? As long as you survive whatever comes your way, that makes you undying."

"And I'm asking you to explain things like a normal person. I understand what you're getting at. If anything, your logic makes perfect sense. The thing is, ordinary humans do not walk away from getting hit by trains or falling off rooftops. That goes for you too, doesn't it?"

The murderer nodded approvingly. In truth, his case of possession wasn't particularly severe. By Origa's criteria, he'd land somewhere between B and C Rank. He shed blood whenever he was wounded, and enough of that would eventually lead to death. His body wasn't all that different from an ordinary human's, and yet he'd found a way to conquer death.

"Ain't all that complicated. Animals've always had a knack for surviving, don't they? It's just a matter of speed, really. For example—"

Just like that, he offhandedly revealed the secret behind his undying body.

This creature had gained the ability to emerge from any catastrophe unvanquished.

What followed was the core that lay within Hinomori Shuusei—the fastest Possessed in existence, boasting indestructible flames.

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"And that's about it. Anyone can do the same, no?"

"....."

Absolutely incomprehensible. His truth was an endless, constant rampage of self-inflicted deaths, burned directly into his own brain. He called himself a hard worker, but that word didn't even begin to describe him.

No, thinking about his past was much more frightening than his body. How had he even arrived at that conclusion? What epiphany would a person have to reach to keep putting himself through that, over and over again? If possible, I wanted to forget what I just heard. Thinking about it any longer would only make my stomach turn.

"So your blood's always at an unchanging temperature? Wait, your name's written with the kanji for autumn and star, right? An unchanging temperature and an autumn star..."

A connection that could only be chalked up to fate surfaced within my mind. There happened to be this well-known star that constantly blazed at a fixed point in the sky, serving as an eternal prison for The Living Flame in a certain fictional myth.

"Um, have you ever heard of this story?"

Even though I knew better, I found myself narrating the tale to him anyway.

A few minutes later, he was nodding along with undisguised, gleeful delight. By the end, he was even angling for a handshake.

"It's perfect! You've done enough, my good sir! I'll work out the other details myself. Man, now nobody out there's ever gonna have a cooler name than me! Just you wait, Tsukiri!"

"Are you sure? Don't you think it sounds kinda old-fashioned?"

"Nah, it's just right. A bit of grandstandin' oughta be just embarrassing enough to leave an impression, aye?"

Cheerfully waving goodbye, Shuusei made his exit through the window.

I took a peek outside when I went to pull it shut, but he was already nowhere to be seen. At this point, there was no denying he was some kind of monster capable of hopscotching across a sea of city rooftops. Still, I was of a different opinion.

"Honestly, I still think 'vampire' suits him best."

Whether the name we had concocted together would ever spread hinged entirely on his future exploits, but in the end, his actions would never be anything

more than murder. As much as I desired to condemn his sins, as someone who lacked the power to stop him, all I could do was pray his mad dance came to an end as soon as possible.

3 / Present (End of Dec 2004)

Touma Mato was handled rather delicately within the Shikura City Police Station.

This wasn't out of any concern for her sensibilities, but because a single misstep around her carried a very real risk of triggering an explosion that took everything and everyone in the vicinity with it.

As an HQ dispatch herself, she had been granted the position of an inspector, though it was clear as day that the title barely scratched the surface of her true authority. Word was she hailed from the Second Public Security Division, where she had earned her stripes suppressing labour disputes and far-left agitation, but First Investigative Division's Investigator Imai Atsushi had long questioned the legitimacy of her credentials.

Questionable résumé notwithstanding, there was no disputing her destined-for-greatness trajectory. A truly promising officer might climb their way up to inspector by their thirties, yet Touma Mato was only in her late twenties. Most officers spent their first year manning a neighbourhood police box before finally being assigned as constables. Only after a year or two of active service would they normally become eligible to sit for the promotional exam, and only after outperforming hundreds of other candidates could they finally attain a sergeant's rank. By that point, most of them were already pushing somewhere around thirty. While inspector was a seat even higher above sergeant, certain elite recruits could be appointed to it upon entry.

Inspector Touma was clearly no ordinary officer, but the fact that Public Security had handpicked her for a special assignment only thickened the veil of mystery around her. Touma Mato was not your garden-variety elite. Authority on that scale did not fall into a person's lap unless someone of considerable standing had put it there.

Even the chief of the Shikura City Police Station had quietly advised his men to say their prayers if she ever set her sights on them.

"Who the heck *is* she?"

To twenty-nine-year-old Imai Atsushi—who had joined the police force back in his student days after a friend talked him into it on a whim—Touma Mato was an unreachable being. Something closer to a mythic hero… or, depending on one's outlook, a monster.

"Investigator Imai. Fetch me the files on November's hit-and-run, would you?"

To this day, Imai still hadn't come to terms with the misfortune of ending up under her command.

There were four colleagues that she dragged along, yes, *dragged along*, with her from police headquarters. These subordinates operated as something closer to a covert private strike team, resolving cases through methods that invited no shortage of suspicion.

Known throughout the precinct as the Four Henchmen of Touma Mato, their hard-bitten faces and rough manners made them seem better suited to organised crime than anywhere near Public Security. In fact, the four of them could often be seen grinning over lunch with members of Shikura's Organised Crime Division.

And yet, despite already having her own wolves at heel, Inspector Touma had gone out of her way to bring the unambitious Imai Atsushi into her ranks.

He had practically been sold into slavery. His direct superior had never so much as reached out to him, and no one had even bothered to warn him he was being fed to the beast. It all happened one day out of the blue.

"Hey, you there. I'm not used to driving a Crown. You're my chauffeur now."

And just like that, he had found himself in her crosshairs.

"The rifling marks are a loose match. It's supplemental evidence at best, but we've got more than enough grounds by now. Get Kareno PD on the line. I want Tougo Kisara's firearm usage logs."

"Yes, ma'am. Still, I wouldn't hold my breath for a quick reply, given what day it is."

"That won't be an issue. What's important is establishing a paper trail. If anything, the longer their response takes, the better it suits us."

Inspector Touma was running several task forces simultaneously.

One such group she headed was the Agonist Disorder Task Force, more commonly known as the Hearse Agency.

Needless to say, the name was not meant kindly; it came from the simple fact that the overwhelming majority of their suspects reached the hospital already zipped into body bags.

Beyond that, her other affiliations dealt with slightly more conventional casework. No one knew who her source was, but the moment a case bore even the faintest fingerprint of Agonist Disorder, she came charging onto the scene. One could only imagine how it felt to be a regular officer in a precinct. After all, she was such a perfect incarnation of violence that even the chief had given up trying to curb her excesses. Resentment and exasperation toward her had nowhere to go but up.

Imai served as the go-between—or more accurately, the lubricant—greasing the wheels between an inspector with a murky Public Security past and the rest of Shikura's more law-abiding police force.

To put it simply, whenever Touma Mato misappropriated other precincts' resources for her own purposes, Imai was the one sent scurrying after whatever documents and warrants she demanded.

"If I may, Inspector Touma. Unless I am mistaken, your current assignment is leading Yamanashi Tomori's manhunt. May I ask what's brought you to investigate a two-month-old traffic accident?"

"Good question. I'd rather be focusing on that myself, but your boss has a way of making my life difficult. You've heard about the Nouzu kidnappings, I assume? He believes Agonist Disorder may be involved, so he borrowed two of my men. At this rate, I'll be lucky to see them again within the next month. Neither of us would want that now, would we?"

"Um, I still don't get it."

"I'm simply trying to see this case resolved as quickly as possible. When you reach Kareno, be sure to ask for Sergeant Tougo's contact information. Ah, my apologies. Former Sergeant Tougo."

Vacating her seat, she hastily made her way out of the First Investigative Division. Proclaiming she would solve a case was one of her ominous catchphrases.

Whenever she declared those words, Touma Mato shed her police officer's skin and revealed a form much closer to that of a soldier. Had Ishizue Arika been present, he would have realised his dear Tomato had flipped into assault mode and made himself scarce without a second thought.

"Ugh, I wish I could call in sick."

Imai was already bracing himself for whatever grotesque crime scene tomorrow would bring, along with the mountain of paperwork sure to come after it.

Left alone in the division room, he rubbed absently at his stomach as he realised, to his own dismay, that his days had grown far more active than anything his career as a detective had ever offered him before.

His gaze drifted toward the window. Outside, a pure-white snowscape reached all the way to the horizon.

It was 9:00 AM, on December 31st.

The snowfall that had been coming down since morning had already rinsed the whole of Shikura clean in immaculate white.

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"Yes, an office building in Koala Hills. There's one called Nishiguchi, and another called Hayashi. Pick one to conceal yourself in. After that, sweep the area for any viable suspects and phone me the instant they so much as twitch. I'm needed elsewhere, but I'll try and settle it as soon as possible. Just remain on standby. Oh, and bring that ball of energy with you. What was her name again? Right, Tsuranui. She'll serve as a good talisman against today's patient. Good luck out there. Even I'd feel a bit guilty letting you die on New Year's Eve, so don't do anything reckless. I'm expecting a greeting once the date changes."

After ending the call, Touma Mato redirected her focus to the nearby telescope. Through the curtain of falling snow, a three-storey amusement park loomed in the distance.

It was just past noon on December 31st, and the police were lurking less than a hundred metres away from the target property. On the far side of the six-lane road

from the amusement park, Inspector Touma and two of her subordinates were conducting surveillance on the suspect from a room within a ten-storey condominium.

"Inspector Touma, the warrant to search Tougo Kisara's residence came through. Shall I get in contact with the lead investigator?"

"When we're already here? Of course not. They won't back off even if they know it's pointless, and there's no way I'm letting anyone interfere with us. Every extra body only increases the risk of tipping off the suspect. If that happens, our only remaining option would be to siege the place. If we waste our time going through all those useless procedures and formalities, we'll be making the arrest next year at best. Besides, Kareno's a whole two hours from here. Three victims will be dead before backup even gets here."

"I take it you wish to maintain our current stance?"

"Forceful and impolite as it may be, we'll take care of this by ourselves. That kind of headache comes with the territory; it's why we get paid. This sector may not be our jurisdiction, but there's a very real chance the abducted residents are Possessed. Looking the other way isn't an option."

Along with her subordinates, she had been tightening the noose around the suspect of a certain kidnapping case. No, to be more precise, she was simply keeping the target under tight observation since a warrant for the suspect's arrest had yet to come through. It was supposed to have been issued by noon, but the situation had already outpaced the paperwork. The culprit had abducted yet another resident of the Nouzu Industrial Complex, holding them captive inside the amusement park she had repurposed as a hideout.

"Can you even believe how this place was built? There's a parking lot in the basement, a bookstore on the ground floor, and an arcade taking up the upper floors. On top of that, the building has an open atrium, making it so that you can see everything from the top. There's no getting inside undetected if the perp is positioned on the third floor."

The floors were arranged in staggered tiers, giving the impression of a terrace.

The amusement park stood beside a major arterial road feeding directly into the expressway, which left no room for residential buildings anywhere in the surrounding area.

Along both sides of the six-lane road, which existed purely as a traffic corridor for cars, a line of shopping complexes stretched into the distance. Since it was New Year's Eve, most of them were closed. Only the department stores remained lit; the majority of businesses, including the amusement park, had gone dark the day before.

Owing to its proximity to the expressway entrance, buildings in the quarter were spaced thirty to fifty metres apart, with certain gaps stretching all the way out to two hundred. In this reclaimed tract on the western edge of C Prefecture, a parking lot dwarfing the building it served was hardly worth remarking on.

The amusement park where the culprit had holed herself up sat in exactly such a property, ringed on all sides by fifty metres of empty ground.

Several cars were stationed in its vicinity, but the snow had already begun to engulf them. Upon verification, six additional vehicles were identified underground beyond the owner's convertible and a STEPWGN. Due to the lot also being used by the owner's associates, it remained reasonably occupied despite the building itself being deserted.

The culprit's car was positioned above ground, though commandeering one from the basement would have presented no obstacle if she needed a clean escape. In other words, the car left on the surface was a decoy. Her real escape route sat idling underground.

Fortunately for the police, the weather had taken their side today. The thick snow that had been piling up since morning had completely choked off the exit ramp leading out of the basement.

"Enough waiting around. The target's working alone—a flashbang should be sufficient to subdue her."

"Inspector Touma, there's no doubting it anymore. One of the officers on Nouzu's perimeter has positively identified Tougo Kisara as the culprit. She repeatedly entered the Nouzu Industrial Complex under the pretext of an investigation and was sighted pressing residents for information on multiple occasions. The working theory

is that she bundled each victim into her car before ferrying them out to their respective murder scenes."

"Her previous pace was one victim per week, until she abruptly escalated to one per day near the year's end. But why choose to escalate after securing a suitable location? Well, we can ask her that during questioning. I've confirmed four victims inside the building. What about you two?"

"I arrived at the same count."

"Same here. There are five of them, including the perp, no doubt about it. Nobody alive runs a tighter surveillance than you, Inspector Touma."

"....."

A shadow of displeasure crossed her face as she peered through the telescope.

Though she had stacked achievement after achievement across every conceivable field, her crowning glory was her innate ability to dissect an entire crime scene through a telescope alone. Every other skill she possessed had been hammered into shape through tireless dedication, making this the one gift she could truly claim to have been born with. Because of that, even Touma Mato herself often cursed the fact that the one natural talent she'd been saddled with was so painfully uninspired.

"I still can't make sense of it, Inspector. What drove Tougo Kisara to begin abducting Nouzu residents? She's a Kareno PD officer. There should be no reason for her to end up in Shikura."

"Former officer, to be exact. She's effectively been AWOL from her sergeant duties ever since her unauthorised absences began in October. I did advise Kareno to process it as a resignation; it would've saved them a great deal of red tape later. She was the officer who took that vampire into custody, but I heard her daughter became one of his victims before they managed to catch him. Ever since, she's been an outspoken Anti-Protection advocate."

Instead of granting patients of Agonist Disorder protection in the eyes of the law, adherents of the movement believed the Possessed were heinous criminals from birth and deserved to be treated accordingly. The faction had a well-attested history of meeting the Possessed with violence of the same order, all in the name of expunging them from society altogether.

"So it's revenge she's after? Even then, that doesn't have anything to do with Nouzu."

"Except it does. Every single person in Nouzu is supposedly Possessed, remember? Whether she actually swallowed that rubbish is another matter, but I cannot imagine any other reason to abduct people and put bullets through their heads. Still—"

"Something doesn't line up. She could've just picked them off one by one per her previous MO. Why kidnap four people only to gather them all in the same location?"

"It looks exactly like a textbook hostage situation. Yet for some reason, she hasn't issued any demands. Which raises the possibility that occupying that building was never meant to draw us in—"

In the next instant, Touma Mato's voice froze over.

Pulling back from the telescope, she immediately set about buckling her bulletproof vest.

"Is something wrong, Inspector Touma? —Wait, what the hell?! What is that dumbass in the black coat doing?! He's headed right for the entrance! Can't that idiot tell it's closed?!"

"A civilian?! This is a disaster. How do you wanna proceed, Inspector Touma?"

"Get my MP5 ready. You two remain on standby here. Notify me immediately if the situation changes."

Bulletproof vest fastened, she slipped her arms into her coat.

Retrieving the case containing her submachine gun, she broke for the exit.

Minutes ago, she'd declared that a flashbang and the Beretta tucked against her chest would be more than enough to neutralise the target. However, the situation had taken a sharp turn for the worse. The instant she spotted that silhouette sauntering toward the defunct amusement park with a gait so offensively carefree, a chill clamped down on her spine. Going in without her full arsenal would put her at a serious disadvantage—a single Beretta M92 would not even begin to bridge the gap between their abilities.

The black-coated man's identity eluded her entirely. Was he a bystander? An accomplice? At this stage, even his loyalties were impossible to read.

All she knew for certain was that he was a criminal of the worst kind. The vicious smirk she'd glimpsed through the telescope spoke directly to her instincts, as if it carried the stink of every corpse he had left in his wake.

"I should've known better than to play it safe, damn it!"

The room they'd set up in was too far removed from the target.

She couldn't afford to waste time passing through the crossing two hundred metres away. The only viable route at this point was to cut straight across the six-lane road.

She was currently on the condominium's sixth floor. It would take three minutes to get clear of the building, another minute to cross the road, and then one more—no, two more, accounting for the heavy snow—to reach the amusement park. Making it in time would be nothing short of a miracle.

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Blood for blood.

Vengeance for vengeance.

That was Hinomori Shuusei's motto. If anything, such impulses were only natural for any human being to carry. Hatred was a self-perpetuating cycle.

Then again, he harboured no personal resentment over having been run over and shot at. He had come to the amusement park for a rather pragmatic reason: to prune away any factors that might foul up his work in the long run.

"Knew I could count on good ol' Maki. Ain't anyone left who knows more 'bout Shikura's Possessed than her."

He stood before a monolithic gravestone blurred by the driving snow—a three-storey block of concrete, fifty metres wide and fifteen metres tall.

At the entrance to the lightless amusement park, the murderer in black slid his blade free in one seamless motion.

"It's showtime, ladies and gentlemen. As a Possessed myself, I can't ignore those who make a habit of abusin' our own."

He brought his katana swinging down toward the door. As the unpowered automatic door refused to split under a single stroke, he settled for kicking it off its tracks and bulldozing his way in. Rows of windows lined the entrance side of every floor, bathing the interior in enough pale daylight to render artificial lighting wholly unnecessary. The snow tried its best to smother the sifting sunlight, but to Shuusei, the abandoned building's hollowed-out shell made for a strangely soothing place, not all too different from any other ruin.

The ground floor housed a bookstore, but unfortunately, there was no one in sight. He took the central staircase up to the second floor, where an arcade stretched from wall to wall, packed dense with hulking cabinets jostling for space. With everything from crane games and ten-player card-game cabinets to horse-racing simulators, finding an assassin hidden among the machines would hardly have been surprising. Once again, not a single one in sight. He proceeded toward the third floor. Because they were located in the corner, the stairs drew a gentle arc as they wound upward.

Cresting the top floor, a low whistle ghosted past his lips.

The space had been surrendered to aging fighting games and light-gun shooters long since left behind by time.

Outside the window, a seamless plain of white snow spread outward.

In brutal contrast to the building's hollow exterior, the third floor had been turned into a living hell for the children within it.

"Why are you still alive?"

Standing in the thick of it was thirty-five-year-old former police officer Tougo Kisara. With a pistol trained in her right hand, she held a gagged, sobbing ten-year-old child against her left.

In addition, three more children had been trussed up along the walls on every side except the entrance—spaced to Shuusei's left, his right, and directly ahead.

"Long time no see, Kisara! Haven't seen ya since, uh... you shot our driver to death an' tried to bump me off on the road to Origa. After all that, I figured maybe you'd gotten it outta your system an' gone back to livin' like a normal cop."

"I thought so too. Everything was going well. That is, until I found out you were *still* alive this summer."

Kisara's voice dripped with venomous hatred.

As one might've expected, the child pinned against her left side had her face contorted in sheer agony. She held her by her bleeding throat, her fingernails gouging mercilessly into the skin.

A dark stain had soaked through the child's shirt as well, visible even from across the room.

Every single one of them had swollen faces, blood crusting their lips, and in the worst case, an arm crudely splinted with bandages. After subjecting them to more violence than their bodies could bear, she had given them just enough treatment to keep them breathing. After all, letting them die too soon would have been inconvenient.

"How cruel. These kids ain't done nothing wrong, y'know?"

"You Possessed don't deserve human rights. Each and every one of them's a monster, just like you."

"And it gets even worse. Look at 'em kids. Everyone's terrified of ya. Buncha slaves shakin' before their queen! Helluva education system you've got goin' here. Man, this shit's real twisted. Why'd they all hafta be the same age as your daughter, eh, Kisara?"

"Don't you even dare mention her, you bastard!"

With the crack of igniting gunpowder splitting the room, a bullet grazed Shuusei's shoulder. While it was possible she had purposefully misfired, it was far more likely that she had simply lost her composure.

"Whoopsie-daisy! Didn't realise you were still hung up on that. Damn, you girls are so scary! What's the big deal, even? It ain't like you died back there. You got my condolences 'bout your girl. Seriously. I mean, to be fair, I am the one who chopped

her little head off. But she's gone. Deal with it. It's been two whole years, and you're still stuck on the same character arc? Real life ain't some anime rerun, y'feel me?"

"You..."

The crunch of her molars grinding together echoed across the room.

The terror beaten into them over the past two days surged back into the children's minds, and all four began to tremble beneath the shadow of fresh violence.

"This is where it ends. You won't get away this time!"

She pointed her gun toward Shuusei.

But before her finger found the trigger, she released the child held in her hands.

A kick to the back sent the child stumbling forward toward Shuusei.

Whatever Tougo Kisara believed those children were, one fact remained beyond dispute: Hinomori Shuusei was a Possessed.

If so, then how would he react to her? Even if he didn't move to shield the child, some modicum of kinship toward his own kind would invariably tug at him.

That was the gap she would drive into. Charging Kisara would expose him, and conversely, moving to catch the child would expose him just as surely.

The instant he let himself be drawn into such a pointless move, she would put a bullet straight through his skull. She had already set the trap in motion before her finger ever reached the trigger.

"....."

It took two whole seconds.

The child was thrust his way, her mouth still bound tightly by the gag. Her lips were split and swollen, blood seeping from both corners, and her bloodshot eyes bore witness to a night spent crying. Since none of them had been fed, her body was already approaching debilitation.

Hinomori Shuusei opened his arms to catch the child.

No—what had appeared to be an embrace was actually his katana driving cleanly through her shoulder, before he discarded her, thrusting the body down toward the second floor.

"Wha...!"

He had made the right decision. The child, a knife palmed in her hands, had been a heartbeat away from burying it deep into his entrails.

"You goddamn monster!"

Despite having devised such a heinous plan herself, Kisara recoiled a step and opened fire.

It shouldn't have made any difference. Whether he'd grabbed the child or let them fall, both would've served. If anything, ignoring her would've been preferable—after the child fled behind him, Hinomori Shuusei would be met with a knife from his blind spot, and when rooted from the shock, Kisara would have riddled him with bullets. That was the first plan Tougo Kisara had come up with.

However, even that would prove to be no match for him. As unbelievable as it was, he unapologetically lunged his blade through the child's shoulder the instant her hand twitched toward the knife. What he accomplished was no longer in the realm of reflex—he had reacted to an event that hadn't even happened yet.

His danger-sensing capacity bordered on precognition. Though the bullets continued to rain upon him, he slipped through their trajectories and batted each round aside as he sauntered toward the shooter.

"Why?! Why won't you just die?! Every damn time, it always ends like this! I shot you over and over again! Threw you off a bridge! Even ran you over with a car! This time's no different! I was sure you were dead!"

"See? That's what happens when ya don't pay attention. For the record, I stepped right inta that crash 'cause I knew I could take it. An' those bullets? Swatted every last one with my sword. You can throw me off however many rooftops ya want. But if I can still stand up an' walk it off, then it ain't worth makin' a fuss over. C'mon, girl. That ain't even enough to give me the tingles."

She'd already burned through her magazine, yet her target showed no signs of stopping. Just as he said, even shooting him at point-blank range was nothing but an idiot's gamble.

"Ah..."

It was hopeless. Losing her will to fight, Tougo Kisara finally made up her mind.

Her gun arm dropped slack at her side as she watched that figure bear down on her in a daze.

"Someone... please, save me."

"What, you surrendering? Hm, this is tough. Normally, I don't got any problems sparin' non-Possessed folks. Unfortunately, or maybe I should say fortunately for you, that kid from just now? They were the real deal."

Kisara realised that something was burning.

The sound seemed to rise from downstairs, somewhere on the second floor. The wet crackle of scorched flesh crawled into her ears.

"I don't... I don't want to die."

"Shoulda just kept her a hostage. That cruelty of yours ended up bein' your downfall, Tougo Kisara. Your blood's already been infected."

The shadowy vampire drew ever closer as she backpedalled till her back met the wall. She had nothing left. At this point, a desperate cry was all she could muster.

"Go, now! Do as I told you, or I'll kill every last one of you!"

With those words, she struck terror back into the remaining children's hearts. This time, her sneak attack finally succeeded.

She'd already dominated them with fear. The three trussed-up children lurched toward Shuusei. As expected, the man raised his weapon and prepared to cut them down. However, something else lay in store.

"Huh? Something's wrong."

His katana froze in mid-air.

At that moment, Tougo Kisara's lips warped into a misshapen smile.

Landing on the second floor, she thumbed a switch and triggered the final, most vicious trap in her arsenal.

Unbeknownst to Shuusei, a bomb had been deployed at the room's corner. In the next instant, a signal triggering its ignition ran through it.

"Gh!"

The entire building quivered.

A white-blue burst of light swallowed the world. And just like that, a searing blast swept across the third floor, engulfing Shuusei and the three children whole.

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The girl witnessed a miracle.

Within that inferno that lasted less than ten seconds, she was certain she'd glimpsed a vampire waltzing through the flames.

All three children had been devoured by the explosion.

A thick red plume instantly blotted out her vision.

Arcade cabinets went flying through the air, pinwheeling like beasts, while every last splinter of wreckage became shrapnel, pulverising everything it struck into pulped masses.

And yet, every last pellet of buckshot ghosted through the fluttering black coat.

One of the children with whom she'd spent the previous night sharing tears had been reduced to a smouldering heap of charred flesh, making her shrink away from the sight. A flying chair had slammed into their shoulder, and moments later tongues of flame licked and writhed around their deformed body.

Thankfully, the detonation's searing flash and thunderclap had compromised both her sight and hearing. Because of that, the merciless nightmare registered in her memory as no more than a blur. Within the next second, the girl found herself swaddled inside the man's black coat. Cocooned within, his coat shielded her from the world outside.

Everything that followed reached her only as a violent rocking sensation—all she knew was that it felt like being carried blindfolded through a runaway roller coaster. The black coat smothered what little sight remained to her.

And yet, within that darkness, she became surer still of what she had seen: the figure of a lone vampire who had swept her into his arms without the slightest hesitation and braved the explosion.

He too shed blood whenever he was wounded, and enough of that would eventually lead to death.

With a body that differed little from an ordinary human's, he had met Tougo Kisara's flawlessly executed ambush head-on. Marshalling instincts that verged on precognition through every heightened faculty at his disposal, he threaded his way through hell as though passing through hundreds upon hundreds of needles.

This was the vampire hailed as immortal.

But the truth behind his so-called immortality proved far simpler than anyone could ever have imagined.

"Ain't all that complicated. Animals've always had a knack for surviving, don't they? It's just a matter of speed, really."

With a smile, Hinomori Shuusei spoke to the young man who, as far as he knew, embodied the polar opposite of everything he was.

There were two forms of death: the first was a death one walked into of one's own accord, while the other waylaid you without warning in the most unremarkable moments of your life.

To him, however, the two were indistinguishable.

Even as the words left his mouth, he was already charting the death that awaited him 0.2 seconds ahead.

"That's all it is. One traumatic experience's all it takes to keep that engine runnin' forever. Y'know that feelin' you get when you're way in the zone, or about to get run over, and your body suddenly kicks into overdrive? If ya just keep your brain locked in that state forever, you'll be able to react to any danger comin' your way."

His mind was continuously extrapolating the worst possible outcome that could befall him.

No, that was not quite accurate. In truth, Hinomori Shuusei was imprisoned within an interminable delusion of annihilation.

And after he had plunged into that delirious hell, the thought of ever returning to his old, ordinary life never once occurred to him.

"Let's say flyin' offa cliff rates about a five on the danger scale. Compared to that, gettin' slashed with a sword ain't more'n two or three. Seriously, I can dodge that shit in my sleep. It's all about maintainin' a sense of insurgency. Nah, wait. Was it

urgency? Anyway, that's the only thing you really need. Keep that flame burnin', and you're good. Average schmucks like us ain't ever gonna hit the same top speed as those natural-born monsters. To try and take 'em head-on is just asking to get your ass kicked. Still, that doesn't mean it's hopeless. But if you pit a genius' takeoff against an ordinary person's maximum speed, you might just have yourself a fair race."

He no longer needed any preparatory ritual to limber his musculature, nor that first inward impulse that set a flickering spirit ablaze. Hinomori Shuusei had already left that all behind four years ago without ever looking back. Whatever hell had led him to forge such a mentality remained unknown, but he had unquestionably eviscerated and cast away the self he had spent two decades constructing.

"Exactly. If a normal dude like me ain't even standin' on the same playing field, then my only move's to keep my speed maxed out. That first rush I felt is gonna ride alongside me till the end of my days. With this ever-boiling blood of mine, I'm gonna stay in top gear till death finally catches up to me. In other words, I have the speed needed to outrun any calamity. Hear me out, boss Arika. To me, uninterrupted motion is the one and only testament of speed."

Even the very act of holding a conversation was but another expression of this man's insanity.

An incessant calculus of extremity churned inside his skull. And steeping himself in that madness was precisely what sustained his impossible top speed.

His blood boiled eternally with the heat of a blazing flame. With his body driven to the brink of self-destruction and his mind teetering on the verge of collapse, he threw himself against the monsters still caught in the throes of relentless acceleration. He would bring every last faculty to bear and cut them down before they could spool up to their full speed.

Therefore, no ambush of any kind could ever hope to overtake him. The truth was that their roles had been reversed from the moment he stepped foot into the building. It had been none other than Shuusei himself who lurked within the shadows.

While his foes had to wind themselves up just to move, his opening move remained a brutally simple constant: absolute top speed. The mechanism behind his

immortality was not his body's make, but the fact that his psyche had already been broken beyond repair.

That was the simple truth behind the immortal vampire—behind Hinomori Shuusei.

"Sheesh, ain't no way a normal person is walkin' outta that."

Standing amid the carbonised wreckage that had once been the third floor, the black-coated man dismissed the whole thing with a throwaway quip.

It was entirely by virtue of his state of mind that he appeared undying. His trait as a Possessed, his mutation, conferred a boost to his physical capabilities comparable to the one Yamanashi Tomori's granted her. He may have lacked her bestial aptitudes, but by Shuusei's own reckoning, his bodily functions were amplified somewhere between three and five times beyond the average adult male's.

"Gotta say, what a letdown. Even if it was only C2, I figured she'd at least go as far as strappin' some to one of their backs. Honestly, I'm impressed ya hung in there that long."

He peeled the girl free from his coat's interior.

"Tough luck for the other three, though. I wouldn't want them forgotten, so try to keep 'em in your heart without beatin' yourself up too much over it."

He thumbed his sunglasses back into place before they could slide any farther down.

In response, the girl could only stare up at the mysterious man in disbelief. There wasn't a trace of fear in her eyes. Instead, the emotion welling up inside them was—

"Mister... the fire—"

Was this the price he'd paid for shielding her? If anything, she seemed to be fretting over the livid burns seared across his back, shoulder, and left leg, from which thin threads of smoke still hissed into the air. The man in question, for his part, didn't seem too worried about them at all.

"Uh-oh, looks like we've got another party crasher here. That was fast."

He felt another presence by the entrance. Mobilising his hearing, his sense of smell, and every nerve in his skin all at once, he perceived, quite literally, the presence of another human being in the vicinity.

It wasn't Tougo Kisara, who'd fled to the second floor. Simply put, a third party had entered the amusement park of their own accord.

Turning away from the girl, his gaze settled on the shattered window overlooking the street.

"This is goodbye, young lady. Oh, but don't get the wrong idea. Don't go thinkin' I did this 'cause you're some good kid, okay? You just happened to be a bit luckier than the rest of 'em."

The silhouette of a woman pushed its way onto the first floor. On top of that, it was clear she was armed with some alarming equipment. The elevator had just come to a stop at B1, which left Shuusei with more than enough leeway to catch up to it.

"Still, it's a miracle that you made it out alive. Make sure to live the rest of your life to the fullest, 'kay? Old man here's gotta take care of that troublesome hag."

He tore across the floor, flames still licking at the air around him. There were scarcely three metres between him and his mark. With one shockingly swift bound, he punched through the window and dropped to the ground below rather than burning time on the stairs again.

Sticking the landing, he and the newly arrived third party missed each other by the barest vertical margin.

As trails of smoke spiralled from his still-burning flesh, Shuusei made straight for the slope leading down to the underground parking lot.

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As though gasping for air, Kisara spilt out of the elevator.

It had all unfolded a mere two minutes prior. After dropping to the second floor and confirming with her own eyes that the black coat had been swallowed by flames, she'd boarded the elevator left idling and ridden it all the way down to the underground parking lot.

"Ha… haha!"

The guilt of having sacrificed her hostages turned her stomach.

Yet, the exhilaration of having levelled the building surged through her as well, mingled with the elation of having finally extinguished the immortal Possessed.

As those spiralling emotions collided within her on the verge of eruption, she broke into a run for her getaway vehicle.

There was no doubt about it. He was dead. He was finally dead. She had witnessed it with her own eyes. There was no conceivable way he'd survived that explosion. He may have emerged from the jaws of death countless times, but this time, that walking corpse had unquestionably been burnt to cinders.

"I did it! After all this time… I've finally done it!"

The past three years had been a living nightmare for her.

Even after that inhumane monster murdered her daughter right before her eyes, she had thrown herself at his feet and pleaded for her life. Regret and shame. Fear and anger. Each excruciating day, the mere fact that this man still walked among the living ripped her to pieces inside. But now, it was finally over. She'd never had any intention of letting him off by allowing him to be carted away to Origa Memorial Hospital. After all, Tougo Kisara would never be able to move on unless she ended him with her own hands.

At last, she could finally hit the restart button on her life. All those years spent living for revenge alone. After that disgusting scheme of shooting both the driver and Shuusei, then pinning it all on that criminal. At last, it was finally over. But unfortunately for her, he would walk away unscathed despite her bullets having unquestionably found their mark. The task force's subsequent disbandment had nearly cost her what little sanity she had left.

Even then, she had sustained that tightrope of her existence by convincing herself that Hinomori Shuusei was long gone. That is, right up until the day she learned he'd risen from the grave anew. Shikura City may have been beyond her reach, but the same held true for Shuusei. All she needed to do was let him go, yet she had willingly thrown herself back into harm's way. The moment she laid eyes on him again, there had been no turning back.

He was no different from a cockroach skittering across the corner of one's room. His very existence would continue to haunt her until she crushed him once and for all. Until he was exterminated, she would never know peace. In hindsight, her life had already gone off the rails the day she lost her daughter. After her husband left her, she had purposelessly drifted through her days like a corpse. All that bottled-up frustration had eventually detonated against Hinomori Shuusei—no, against the very existence of the Possessed as a whole. Even as she held a gun to the heads of Nouzu's kidnapped residents and forced them to beg for their lives, not the faintest flicker of satisfaction stirred inside her. On the contrary, it had only deepened her nausea. For she had never wanted to lay a finger on those foul Possessed.

But it was only by anchoring herself to such a rationalisation that she could remain faithful to her resolve. She'd come to understand that she stood no chance against that monster unless she became a murderer in her own right. And so, she had set about luring him in, casting aside her life, her conscience, her morals—her everything—in the process. And now, once and for all, it was finally over.

"Sorry, but this's the end of the line for you."

"B-But… why?"

How could this possibly be? She was absolutely certain that the black devil standing before her was gone from this world. She had struck him down.

"Why? Whyyyy?!"

The instant she realised the truth—that he was indeed truly immortal—the last thread holding her together finally snapped.

The *thing* in front of her was a cold-blooded serial killer.

Even setting aside whether its deathlessness was genuine or not, the sheer fact that it had cheated death this many times over was proof enough of its immortality.

"Why… why are you still alive?!"

She ripped out her handgun and hammered the trigger.

Kisara had made absolutely certain to reload beforehand. Eight rounds tore toward him in a staccato burst. But the man still wreathed in flames swatted every last one of them aside.

"That's the last question you'll ever ask. I suppose I owe ya at least this much. Alright, I'mma give you the answer you came here for."

His earlier breeziness had evaporated without a trace.

Catching sight of a monstrous, unrecognisable reflection in his sunglasses, Tougo Kisara let out a long, slow breath when she realised that strange creature was none other than herself.

"For I am The Living Flame—the blazing cradle Fomalhaut. So long as this blood of mine hungers, I shall rise however many times it takes."

Just like that, she heard the solemn *squelch* of a jagged stake driving through her heart.

▪▪▪

It was just as Touma Mato was approaching the parking lot that the amusement park's third floor was devoured by flames.

"Inspector Touma, a bomb's been set off on the third floor! A few more minutes and the fire's gonna tear through the whole building! The perp's an absolute psycho!"

"I can *see* that, dumbass! Get fire suppression on it now!"

With the briefcase housing her submachine gun clutched in one hand, she barked into the radio without breaking stride. No matter the situation, she wouldn't slow down for even a second.

Even with nearly twenty centimetres of snow smothering the asphalt, she ploughed straight through it without losing form.

Six minutes exactly to her destination. At a clip that would've put most athletes to shame, she tore across the six-lane road and cleared the hundred-metre spread of parking lot before skidding to a halt at the building's blasted entrance.

"I'm heading in. Refrain from contacting me in the next two minutes."

She drew the submachine gun from its case and spent the next few seconds priming it for combat. There was no time left to reconnoitre the scene. As absurd as it sounded, a human figure seemed to be standing in the heart of the detonation site.

It could only be Tougo Kisara or the intruder she'd spotted earlier. Whoever it was, nothing would happen until she ventured within.

She advanced from cover to cover, exercising her full caution and bracing herself for contact as she cut swiftly through the building.

From the entrance to the ground floor. From the ground floor to the stairwell. From the stairwell to the second floor.

A stretch of open ground stood between her and the stairs leading up to the third floor. Trying to take it straight across would leave her dangerously exposed to anyone lying in wait above. So she worked around the blast-mangled wreckage of the arcade cabinets and ghosted her way toward the staircase.

Two voices drifted down from overhead. Climbing the stairs with equal parts speed and caution, she brought her submachine gun and her gaze sweeping across the entire floor the instant she crested the top. And as though tagging out with her, a human-sized black mass sprang into motion and vaulted out through the window.

"Tch!"

However violently every instinct screamed at her to give chase, there was a civilian who needed attending to first. After ushering the injured girl partway toward the parking lot, she gave her the instructions she needed to finish the evacuation on her own.

"There's a policeman waiting over by the crosswalk. Don't look back. Just run straight to him."

Wheeling on her heel, she sprinted back toward the amusement park. The figure was no longer anywhere to be seen. They had missed each other by a hair's breadth less than two minutes ago. In that short an interval, it was all but impossible for him to have completely vanished from her sight.

Which left only one possible destination he could have made for. It had to be the underground parking lot—the very place where the culprit had presumably arranged her getaway car.

The entrance sat on the east side of the building. A fresh trail of footprints had already cut a path through the snow ahead of her. Hounding them, she crept down the ramp leading underground.

She scanned the fifty-metre stretch of the parking lot for a brief moment. By the next second, her next move was already determined.

◆

Enclosed by a steel thicket of parked cars, a single man stood there at his leisure.

The intruder in black had posted himself with his back to the entrance—with his back to Touma Mato. Before him, a sheet of flame billowed upward, devouring the body collapsed beneath it.

Most likely Tougo Kisara. Her body had been set alight, silently leaving a trail of smoke. As though she were a human candle, the flame fluttered with the wind.

"....."

It took a single second, no, a fraction of one for Touma Mato to react. She ripped the safety pin from the canister clipped to her belt and lobbed it at him in one seamless motion.

As it arched across thirty metres of open ground, she ducked behind the nearest car and clamped both hands over her eyes in the same breath.

A full second later, the entire parking lot detonated in a retina-searing flash and an eardrum-splitting roar.

A stun grenade—a staple of counter-terrorist and hostage rescue operations. Built to incapacitate its target on the spot, it robbed the perpetrator of sight and hearing in one overwhelming discharge.

The blinding light seared their eyes, robbing them of their vision. And whatever trauma was inflicted upon the eyes propagated straight into the brain, dragging violent nausea and full-body disorientation in its wake. On top of that, the noise was no less savage. At a volume that sent tremors running through one's skin, it paralysed the ears and submerged its target in minutes of total silence.

By stripping the perpetrators of their most basic sensory functions, it carved open a narrow window for hostages to be swiftly extracted from the premises. For anyone who had never been on the receiving end of one before, that simultaneous assault on the senses was all but impossible to evade.

Once Mato confirmed the blast had died out, she leaned from behind the car and drove the muzzle of her submachine gun onto the man.

"Tch."

There, she spotted him with one arm thrown across his eyes.

She had no way of knowing yet, but the man in the black coat—Hinomori Shuusei—never went anywhere without his trusty sunglasses. On top of shutting his eyes, he had screened the blast with his arm, letting the lenses absorb the remainder. Thanks to that, the stun grenade had virtually no effect on his sight.

But on the other hand, it also meant he had no means of protecting his ears. One hand remained fastened around his weapon, while the other he fully committed to guarding his eyes. In other words, he was physically incapable of blocking his ears off. The stun grenade impaired the man's hearing, cutting him off from every sound around him. In such cases, the abrupt erasure of a sense invariably bred confusion in the aftermath.

Although he protected his vision, he had given up his hearing in return.

Realising her sufficient advantage, she pulled her submachine gun's trigger.

Her weapon sounded almost hushed against the stun grenade's prior detonation. And yet, in terms of lethality, this unbridled instrument of violence constituted a far graver menace.

An MP5—the submachine gun synonymous with police-standard operations, another cornerstone of counter-terrorist and neutralisation work. Although submachine guns were typically engineered for suppressive fire rather than precision shooting, the MP5 was one of the rare models that permitted an operator to aim and actually land the shot altogether. Its accuracy made it a liability in open warfare, but in hostage situations and close-quarters confrontations with barricaded criminals, it was virtually unrivalled.

At a cadence of ten rounds per second, a relentless hail of 9mm rounds soared toward the target. While it lacked the firepower of a heavier calibre, it carried more than enough suppressive force to stitch a deafened man full of holes. Combined with Touma Mato's sharpshooting, there was no chance her MP5 would miss its mark. She would never have touched the trigger without ironclad certainty to begin with.

"...!"

But despite that, her target had manoeuvred his way between her shots.

Before doubt could even catch up to what her eyes were showing her, she sent another burst of bullets after him as he broke wide at a freakish speed.

Twelve gunshots cracked through the parking lot in metronomic succession, but the dark phantom evaded each and every one of them.

The man had sniffed out her ambush beforehand. But how?

He dashed toward the cover of a nearby car, threading her submachine-gun fusillade by a hair's breadth the entire way.

"Damn it."

Easing off the trigger, she snapped her focus onto the vehicle he'd ducked behind. She had no intention of resorting to anything as asinine as hosing the entire lot down just to try and smoke him out. She might've considered scratching that particular itch had she brought something with more barrel behind it, but right now, it struck her as wholly unnecessary.

She held the mouth of the underground parking lot, corking his only escape route shut. Her target carried what appeared to be a long-bladed weapon, but no firearm of his own. As long as she held this chokepoint, she remained well outside the range of any meaningful threat. He wouldn't be able to hide forever. The moment her subordinates arrived within the next five minutes, it'd undoubtedly be checkmate for him. Three armed officers bearing down on a single gun-less target would hardly break a sweat.

Another minute passed. Gauging his hearing's recovery, Touma Mato raised her voice to open a line of dialogue.

"I didn't get the chance to mention it earlier, but I'm with the police. Since I'm obligated to say this, I'll say it one time only. Surrender now, and I'll let you off with only a few rounds through both legs."

It was a brazen abuse of authority.

She hadn't so much as breathed a word about his right to remain silent or his entitlement to counsel. But that alone gave Hinomori Shuusei more than enough to read her by.

Understanding what breed he was up against, a wolfish grin hooked itself across the man's lips from behind the convertible.

"Alright, game on! If you wanna dance, I'll show ya just how light I am on my feet."

He ambled to his feet, deliberately presenting himself as a target.

"Heh."

Both of them had wicked smiles playing about their lips.

Hinomori Shuusei found himself genuinely delighted by her inhumanity, while Touma Mato felt her spirits rise at his sheer audacity—at how readily he had risen to her provocation.

Snaking through the hail of bullets, he sent his katana hurtling through the air like a javelin.

"Ngh!"

She instinctively dodged the projectile that knifed toward her heart with unerring precision.

That infinitesimal gap was all the black coat needed to surge in.

Everything was going according to plan. She snapped her gun back into line just as her quarry entered right into her crosshairs.

"Yippee! I've always wanted to do this!"

As a lunatic voice shrieked from behind the wheel, she could only stand there perplexed as a car came barreling straight at her.

"……"

With a measly twenty metres of distance between them, it was only a matter of time before it crashed into her. He must've hot-wired it while hunkered down. From

what she could tell, the engine had only just turned on. How long before it built up enough acceleration? No, the car itself was of little importance. All she had to do was put a few rounds through that moronic-looking driver before it got to her.

"I ain't letting you do that!"

"What the?!"

Just then, the seat vanished from her sight. Cranking the recline all the way back, the man flattened himself across the driver's seat. With him lying supine like that, putting a bullet through anything vital became an entirely different challenge.

One foot mashed against the pedal, while the other hooked around the steering wheel. Seat still reclined, the jovial freak craned his head just enough to lock onto Touma Mato.

"Call it quits now, an' ya might walk away with just your legs busted!"

"Are you *stupid*?!"

He *was*, in fact, stupid. The devil in the convertible charged at her in a deranged imitation of a Hollywood stunt reel, in a manner not even the drunkest street thug would attempt in this day and age. There was no question that this thousand-kilo hunk of metal would end her life if she allowed it to run unhindered.

"....."

Zero seconds. Fragmented thoughts continued firing through her mind. She had to stop the car, but how? Could she unload into the hood and blow the engine? No, that was impractical. An MP5 wouldn't be enough, either. A lucky shot might manage it, but there was no way to draw a proper bead. In other words, there was no guarantee it would succeed. The driver's seat was equally out of the question. At this point, her MP5 was no more than a dead weight.

One second. What if she flung herself out of the way? Afterward, she could punish him from the flank or the rear, emptying the entire magazine if necessary. No, that wouldn't work, either. There was a reason he had his feet wrapped around the steering wheel. The moment she broke in any direction, he'd simply crank the wheel her way. Dodging was suicide no matter which way she cut. Only a single option remained now.

Two seconds. A mere ten metres was left between them. The outcome was visible to anyone. Two more seconds, and the car would crash into her at a speed of 60 kilometres per hour. But if she moved now, she could close the distance before it reached full acceleration.

"Damn... you...!"

Discarding her MP5, she launched herself toward the car at full tilt.

The remaining ten metres between them shortened to five.

With precise timing, Touma Mato planted one foot on the hood and used it as a springboard. Executing a forceful yet elegant sideways revolution into a flawless axel jump, she cleared a height equivalent to the tenth tier of a vaulting box. It was the same manoeuvre Hinomori Shuusei had used to evade Tougo Kisara's hit-and-run.

The difference was that Touma Mato spun midair while drawing the Beretta from her chest holster.

"No freakin' way!"

Needless to say, she had no reason not to fire. Suspended in midair, she settled her finger on the trigger and fired down at the idiot lounging so brazenly in the driver's seat.

"Who the heck *are* you, lady?!"

He ejected himself from the car while maintaining the same posture. It was pure upper-body strength that launched him upward, yet any onlooker would've sworn he had coiled springs buried in his back.

Left driverless, the convertible careened into a wall.

The female inspector landed carrying a levelled Beretta, while the murderer touched down within arm's reach of his katana.

She was deep within the lot, while he had come down just near the entrance.

And just like that, hunter and prey had exchanged places.

If an MP5 couldn't put him down, a measly Beretta had no business doing so either. She'd had a shotgun back at Shikura Hills, while this time she had a stun grenade and submachine gun. All she could do was grind her teeth and seethe at herself for not having brought a flashier weapon.

Taking in the sight of a woman in her late twenties who clearly lavished more attention on her arsenal than on her wardrobe, it finally hit him.

"Oh, I get it now. You're Touma Mato, ain'tcha?"

Weapon gripped in one hand, he addressed her with an ear-to-ear smirk.

"Indeed, I am. Why do you know my name?"

She trained the Beretta's barrel on him as an answer.

Her pride made it constitutionally impossible for her to address a criminal on equal footing, but his question seemed to pique her interest.

"Nah, it's nothing. Somebody warned me Shikura had itself one helluva scary policewoman who'd chop any Possessed she met inta little flesh cubes. Oh, you wanna know who I heard it from? Sorry, but I ain't no snitch. My source made me swear I'd take their name to the grave."

In his own element as ever, despite this being their first time crossing paths, he had struck Inspector Touma as nothing more than an ordinary drunkard at first glance. Actually, she'd had him pegged as a drug addict the entire time.

"I see. I know not whom you're referring to, but they are every bit as culpable as you. Pass along my regards the next time you see them."

"The next time? My, oh my. So you lettin' me off with just a warning, Ms. Officer?"

"Oh? Do you intend to see this dance through to the end, Possessed?"

They pointed their murder weapons toward each other in silence.

It would take until the not-so-distant future for these two to truly comprehend the other's nature.

Touma Mato was a master who had once battled and vanquished a superhuman whose powers exceeded anything mankind could ever bring forth.

But Hinomori Shuusei occupied the interstice between those two domains—a fiend who embodied the traits of both man and devil alike.

"I'd love to keep ya company 'til the end, but you're clearly cut from a different cloth. And time's money, y'know? Let me off the hook this once, and I'll owe ya big

time. Oh, and for the record, I ain't the one who blew up the third floor. The kids upstairs were just collateral damage."

"There was one survivor. She said a 'tall mister in a black coat' saved her."

"Hey, that's just how it goes. Gotta do my part as a fellow human being. Bet you've hadda save more than a few scumbags you'd rather see dead 'cause of your job, didn't ya, Ms. Officer? Same here. I never let personal feelings decide whether I'm killin' somebody or not. Woulda saved everybody a whole lotta trouble if little ol' Kisara got that through her head, though."

"You knew Tougo Kisara? That explains it. So you're Hinomori Shuusei. The victim from that hit-and-run two months ago, aren't you?"

"The one and only. Didn't bother reportin' it, since I pretty much walked away scot-free."

"Based on what you just said, I take it you didn't kill her out of revenge?"

"'Course not. All I wanted was for her to quit gettin' in the way of my business. But unfortunately, that's just how life works sometimes. We wound up in a kill-or-be-killed relationship."

"Interesting. I took you for just another run-of-the-mill murderer, but it seems you've got your own reasons. I've read your files, vampire murderer. Hinomori. You're after Patient H—after Heartless, aren't you?"

"Heartless? The hell's a Heartless?"

"A patient whose mutation is their heart. Those deemed exceptional even among D-Rank patients are given the designation of 'less.' It means they no longer resemble humans in any shape or form. As of now, there are roughly three Possessed who carry that designation, Heartless being one of them. One of the very few D-Rank patients whose existence was confirmed before Origa Memorial Hospital's construction even began."

"Hmm. All the famous ones really *do* get cool names, huh? Well, lady, I figure you're better off readin' 'tween the lines and working it out yourself. Ain't like you'd suddenly decide to help me out if I throw you a bone, right?"

"Absolutely not. Whatever your circumstances, I'll put you down, mutilate you, and ship you straight to Origa."

"Hell yeah, now we're talkin'! Negotiations're already falling apart! Nothin' good ever comes from leaving your business in somebody else's hands. Anyway, that's about all I have ta say. I'm gonna take my leave now, if it's all the same to you."

Of course it wasn't. But as much as it galled her, all Touma Mato could do was fix him with a glare.

She was in no position to neutralise him as things stood—after all, both her personnel and her equipment had been arranged with Tougo Kisara as the sole target in mind. Had she still been holding the entrance, she might've been able to bottle him up until reinforcements arrived. But that ship had already sailed.

"Out of my sight, vampire. There won't be a next time."

"Ugh, I'd appreciate it if ya didn't call me that, Ms. Officer. The name's Fomalhaut. I am the, uh… the Living Flame—the, erm… blazing cradle… Fomalhaut!"

As he fumbled through the line, she simply stared at him with a deadpan expression.

"Wait, this doesn't make any sense! Why am I stuttering so much?! This is so darn embarrassing! Stop! Naw! Don't look at me, it's embarrassing! It rolled off the tongue so smooth just a second ago! Are you tellin' me that was a one-off?! Say it ain't so, boss!"

"……"

She watched in silence as he thrashed about, holding his head in his hands.

"It's all about reps! Reps, darn it! Just you wait, lady! I'll be a completely different beast by the time we meet again!"

With that spectacularly awkward send-off, Hinomori Shuusei shot out of the parking lot. At a speed that was, as ever, tremendous. Within the curtain of falling snow, the shadow bled farther and farther into the white.

"What an absolute buffoon. Not even thirty men would be enough to take him into custody. If we're serious about catching him, putting together a dedicated hunting unit would be the bare minimum."

She lowered her gun as she breathed a sigh.

Though he had escaped, her original objective had already been achieved. There was plenty of cleanup left to deal with, between recovering Tougo Kisara's remains

and putting out the fire, but she had a team that specialised in exactly that kind of aftermath.

"Inspector Toumaaa? Are you there?"

Speak of the devil. One of her two subordinates had jogged into the parking lot.

"Yeah, come in. It's clear now. Is the girl secured?"

"Yeah, she's accounted for. Officer Iba handled everything upstairs and sent me down to look for you—whoa! You really made a mess of the place again, Inspector! Where'd Tougo Kisara go? And what about that man in the black coat?"

"That heap over there is Tougo Kisara. As for the other intruder, he got away."

"W-wait, what?! Y-You can't be serious?! D-D-Did you seriously just say he got away?! He got away f-from you?! Are you sure you didn't cut him loose just so you could torture him later?!"

"What exactly do you take me for? I don't start on them until *after* they're in custody. I'll brief you on him later. Fomalhaut, eh?" she muttered, a scowl on her face.

A remarkably unguarded look for someone who usually maintained such cold-blooded composure under any circumstances.

"Fomal… what?"

"A famous first-magnitude star of autumn. If I recall correctly, it translates roughly to 'mouth of the fish.'"

Placing a finger on her lip, she sank into thought as she lowered her gaze toward the mouth of the slope, where snow kept falling without end. As she stared upon the mound, she recalled the silhouette that vanished within its midst.

"Heh. As much as it pains me to admit, that's a pretty badass name for a lowly criminal."

She couldn't help but let slip a murmur of honest admiration.

As it turned out, Touma Mato's sensibilities were every bit as stuck in the eighties as Hinomori Shuusei's.

/ FOMALHAUT.end

4. /Vt.in day dream.

▪▪▪

As one might suffice from the date, February 14th is a day that calls for celebration. Think of it as a festival on par with Mardi Gras or Easter—a day when both joy and gratitude are repaid in kind, swept up in a storm of fluttering flowers that rages on until every last drop of sentiment has been utterly exhausted.

At long last, the time has come for my resolve to be rewarded by a sweet offering of crimson sugar.

"All right. It's time to get some cleaning done."

I tear through the iron door, a smile plastered across my face.

To me, February 14th has always been a day to work up a sweat.

Today is a day of confession—one where not a single shred of mercy or consideration will stop me in my tracks.

Unfortunately, the weight of my feelings only ever steers me down a one-way collision with the wall.

For some reason, this jinx has haunted me for the past three years.

And as you might expect, this year isn't proving to be any different.

◆

A daydream at story's end.

The whereabouts and continuation of a single girl's modest dream.

Arika

——————————— / Vt.in day dream.

0 / (Feb 24th 2005)

▪

It was just past 3:00 AM, when even the plants were sleeping, that she received an emergency signal from Origa Memorial Hospital. There were only a scant three hours remaining until dawn broke.

Having been contacted in her capacity as a special adviser to Origa's security division, Touma Mato had a helicopter requisitioned within minutes and set out for the hospital in the mountainous outskirts of N Prefecture.

The staff member who got through to her was barely coherent, conveying only scattered fragments of information.

At 10:00 PM on the 13th, a riot had broken out among the Agonist Disorder patients housed within the facility.

While ignited over a C-Rank patient's trivial infraction, the chaos metastasised rapidly until it eventually propagated toward Ward B. Whether it had been premeditated was unknown, but the patients had revolted in full sync. With the precision and cohesion with which they mobilised, the overwhelmed staff were driven back to Ward A and forced to relinquish the remainder of the hospital. Though the patients had already breached central Ward A's third floor, the situation took a massive turn when Origa's Security Squadron descended at midnight on the 14th. The B- and C-Rank patients who had risen up were immediately put down.

However, the C-Rank patient believed to have instigated the riot had already pried open Ward D. The situation then took a turn for the worse when a lone girl was sighted emerging from deep within.

Everything came apart at 3:00 AM of the same day.

In a single minute, what had been a transient uprising among Origa's patients degenerated into a tableau of indiscriminate slaughter.

▪

We were two thousand metres in the air, hovering above the mountains of N Prefecture.

"That about sums it up. I'll make an exception and let you arm yourself tonight. But don't count on anyone else to look out for you."

With the helicopter's rotors hammering away behind her, Ms. Mato passed me a small handgun.

"That's not the problem here! Why the hell is this even happening?! How did I wind up here of all places?! I've got zero stake in this, haven't I?!"

I tried to throw my hands up in flat-out refusal, but both of my shoulders were strapped down with harness belts.

None of this made any damn sense. I, Ishizue Arika, had already surrendered myself to the peaceful arms of slumber when Ms. Mato handed me an express ticket to the mouth of hell.

"What's with all the fuss? Lighten up, Shozai. Remember when you invited me to go to an amusement park with you because I'd never been to one? This is practically the same thing. Then again, a secret lab in the middle of the mountains is a pretty bold pick for a first date."

"That was sarcasm! Ever heard of it?! I couldn't give less of a shit about cats and rats! And you're the one who said you wanted to ride a coaster that was rolling, remember?! Origa doesn't have *any* of that! There's nowhere to just hang out and have fun down there!"

"Hahaha, don't worry. I'm sure we'll have lots of fun. If nothing else, I can't think of anywhere else that offers a better rush."

They couldn't have picked anything worse to be the best at.

"Knock it off with the laughing! You're planning to take me to Ward D, aren't you?!"

"Come on, no need to be so mad. Look, what goes on inside Origa is strictly classified. I'd need to go through some hoops to bring even one of my subordinates

along. You're the only one who can go in there with half an hour's notice. Sorry for putting you out like that, okay?"

"Um, uh… it's fine."

My brain short-circuited.

M-Ms. Mato had just, in all seriousness, apologised to me. This was only working to put me off even more, just in a completely different way. I imagine it's the same feeling you'd get if a friend called you up out of nowhere to announce they were getting married tomorrow.

"We should be touching down soon. That gun's been loaded with tranquiliser rounds that affect upon contact with the target. You're an amateur, so I'm not expecting any sharpshooting from you. Just pull the trigger the moment anyone tries to get their hands on you. Each round carries enough neurotoxin to lead a person to death. Going by yesterday's files, they haven't run any trials on Batrachotoxin yet, so it shouldn't have built up any resistance."

"I don't think that qualifies as a tranquiliser anymore. Oh, and what do I do if it doesn't try to grab me?"

"Then you'll just have to give up. All right, time to get going. Remember, you're supposed to be my trump card. Don't you dare leave my side."

The helicopter held its hover above the central ward of my nostalgic old haunt, Origa Memorial Hospital.

Ms. Mato had a large-calibre handgun straight out of a comic book gripped in both hands, with something even more absurdly over-the-top slung across her shoulders. An anti-tank rocket launcher. Yup, an actual one. In place of her usual Beretta, she'd shown up tonight packing a Desert Eagle—a firearm known to be the strongest among all handguns on the market.

"Hrm."

Still, I couldn't wrap my head around why she needed both hands on it. Just like with blade work, holding a gun with two hands traded off accuracy for raw presence and suppressing power.

The moment we dropped into the central ward through the rooftop access, it immediately clicked why Ms. Mato had equipped herself with the heaviest firepower available.

The hallway had been transformed into a scene straight out of hell. Corpses of staff and patients alike were splattered across the floor, pinned against the ceiling, and smeared into the walls.

Some were torn to shreds as though they'd been feasted upon, while others had been carved up like sectioning timber.

If I had to hazard a guess, even these people—among the comparatively luckiest bunch of Origa's eight hundred residents—could only make it this far before someone cut them down.

Rumble.

A localised earthquake rocked the central ward.

Factoring that alongside whatever was unfolding in the floors below, there was a reasonable case to be made that Ms. Mato had actually come under-equipped.

"Ms. Mato, are there any other survivors?"

"I'm picking up seven signals. One of them's that thing, no doubt about it. These two blips here are us. Other than that, there's one survivor each in Wards B, C, and D. The last one's—"

Both of us already knew where the last one was.

On the twenty-fifth floor, Origa's uppermost level, a silhouette materialised through the warped corridor ahead.

Wearing a Ward D uniform and sporting a grin that had no business being that wide, a man openly savoured the arrival of fresh prey.

"Kuramitsu Meruka!"

She fired her Desert Eagle, boasting bullets of a calibre much greater than a Beretta.

A fraction of a second later, a .44 Magnum round that possessed the ability to tear a human body apart by simply grazing it screamed toward the D-Rank patient she'd called Kuramitsu.

▪

An ocean of blood stretched as far as the eye could see.

A rectangular corridor plated in iron, its floor submerged beneath a deep-scarlet puddle that carried the thick, gelatinous consistency of jelly.

And yet, for all that the hallway was flooded ankle-deep in gore, not a single corpse was anywhere to be seen. It was as if every drop of blood saturating Ward D had wept directly from the rooms themselves.

There stood Ishizue Kanata, poised atop the crimson carpet.

She embodied a flawless harmony of contradicting elements—the splendour of a rose, the delicacy of a chrysanthemum, and the radiance of a sunflower. No one else could have personified the phrase "as beautiful as a flower" so entirely. Today marked her seventeenth birthday. The guileless, innocent maiden she'd been two years prior had since blossomed into a fine woman. Then again, that was only true where her physical appearance was concerned.

Five metres off stood another girl bearing a similar countenance.

Her name was Hirumiya Ruzeru, a fellow D Ward patient known to harbour the fiercest hatred for Ishizue Kanata among their peers.

Unfortunately for her, she had been intercepted mid-flight toward the central ward by Kanata herself, who had just calmly proclaimed her intent to annihilate every living soul within Origa.

"You're insane. Are you seriously planning to kill every last one of us?"

With eyes brimming with hatred and tension, Ruzeru scowled at the monster in front of her. At that very moment, she was caught in an agonising tug-of-war—to

flee and resign herself to death, or to stand and grapple with her foe for the vaguest ghost of a chance at survival.

"My, I wasn't expecting to hear something so adorable coming from you," Kanata murmured, a cool, untroubled smile playing on her lips. "You still consider yourself sane after four years in this place? You're only making things harder on yourself."

Amid this ocean of blood, she and Hirumiya Ruzeru stood diametrically opposed. Their standing, their power, their very disposition were all utterly at odds. There was no room for ambiguity here; it was clear at a glance who was the hunter and who was the prey.

While Ruzeru scrambled desperately to claw out a path to survival, Kanata betrayed not a single hint of unease.

All that stirred in her was a faint ripple of displeasure. Currently, she was clad only in minimal sportswear, not too dissimilar to a set of undergarments. It couldn't be helped, given how suddenly everything had turned upside down, but she had really wanted to run rampant in her formal gown when this day finally arrived.

"Don't you dare lump me in with you. I am perfectly sane. Those weaklings who surrender themselves to madness are nothing like me."

"Oh, do excuse me. Still, I'm just as lucid as you are. It was with a perfectly rational, sound mind that I arrived at the conclusion that I could annihilate every last one of you. I mean, why else would I even bother? Only a complete nutjob picks a fight they know they can't win."

"And I'm telling you you've lost your damn mind! You actually think you can slaughter everyone here? Seriously? All you've got going for you is some brawn. You're a joke. You might outstrip me in raw power, but you don't stand the faintest chance when it comes to manipulation. Everyone else here is the same. The Possessed of Ward D are capable of things beyond your wildest imagination. Even if you managed to kill the C Ranks, we—"

"Oh, whoops. I guess you didn't know," Kanata interrupted, her voice dropping into a sing-song tone as a coquettish smile graced her features. "I'm sorry, Hirumiya, but little old me and you? We're the last two living souls left in this ward."

"Wh—"

It was no surprise that Ruzeru was struck entirely speechless.

Every single patient of Ward D was a monster in their own right. They were creatures whom even Origa's own physicians—bound by duty to treat every case of Agonist Disorder as a human patient—had long since abandoned, leaving them fit to be called nothing but the Possessed. And this girl had just casually declared that only the two of them remained out of forty beings who defied human logic.

Granted, some among them bore late-stage symptoms so severe they could no longer so much as twitch a finger. Out of those forty, perhaps only ten possessed the actual means to execute a massacre in so brief a span as Kanata had. And yet that was precisely what set them apart—they were the anomalies among anomalies. Outliers worthy of the name Possessed. Just as Ruzeru and Kanata were feared, so too did the staff cower before the rest of their kind. And yet, by her word, every one of them had been extinguished.

What had become of that repulsive pool of entrails? What of the man who could seclude himself within a space so isolated it bordered on an alternate dimension? The child who could reduce corpses to soup in the blink of an eye? That creature capable of unmooring people so completely they lost even their very sense of self? Had she truly disposed of every last one of them single-handedly?

"Ishizue—"

"Got you raring to go, I see. Good. This way, I get to preserve you while you're nice and fresh. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, after all. It would be a terrible shame not to sample everyone's mutations and lock them away for myself."

Kanata's frame sank lower. Her leg anchored to the iron floor as she coiled like a spring, preparing to pounce upon her target. The vibration born of that single preparatory motion sent a ripple rolling across the carpet of crimson.

"Kanata!"

Ruzeru's vocal cords tore through the corridor, setting the very air vibrating.

Even a monster like Kanata couldn't outpace the speed of sound. She burst through the puddle of blood in a desperate leap forward, but Ruzeru's mutation intercepted her head-on—a suggestive synchronisation of vital wavelengths, their

biographs summoned forth by voice alone. By discharging a bioelectric pulse from within her own body, Ruzeru could hijack the neural activity of anyone within a thirty-metre radius.

Rumble.

Their clash was over within two seconds. Putting her full weight behind the strike, Kanata's right fist sailed past Ruzeru and buried itself deep into the wall behind her.

The iron wall groaned in protest under the impact. Though it carried enough force to cave in Ruzeru's stomach with a single blow, Kanata's fist had strayed the barest fraction left. It wasn't that Ruzeru had evaded the strike, but rather that Kanata had completely misjudged the distance.

There was no conceivable way she could have botched so simple a motion. She never missed, nor did she falter. Attempting to figure out the reason behind so baffling an error, Kanata turned back toward her target.

"Wh-what?!"

Kanata stared up at Ruzeru, utterly gobsmacked. The girl stood under 160 centimetres, yet she had suddenly become a towering colossus, looming some ten times Kanata's height—a vertiginous sight to behold.

"Fufu, welcome to my world. It's over for you now, my little plaything!"

Needless to say, Hirumiya Ruzeru hadn't actually sprouted in size; the laws of physics simply wouldn't permit it. So was it the reverse? Had Ishizue Kanata withered down to a tenth of her size within the span of seconds? That was even less conceivable. The constraints of gravity would never allow a living being an expansion or contraction so absurdly extreme.

Therefore, this wasn't a physical problem, but a mental one. Kanata's perception of the world had simply been distorted. It wasn't that her surroundings had expanded, nor that she herself had shrunk; rather, the scale through which her brain processed visual images and spatial awareness had been catastrophically misaligned.

"Ugh, what *is* this? It feels *way* too real."

What she was witnessing wasn't reality. More precisely, it was an expanded illusion of reality that her brain was perceiving. Yet knowing that did nothing to alter

it; the colossal world flooding her five senses was far too vivid to dismiss. What had once been a puddle of red had swollen into a crimson lake, welling up until it engulfed her shoulders.

Afflicted with a visual disability since childhood, Hirumiya Ruzeru had long insisted she was being slowly hemmed in and crushed by her own surroundings. Unfortunately, her pleas always fell on deaf ears where her parents were concerned. Huddled up in the corner with her eyes closed, she was swiftly written off by her peers as a shy, maladjusted girl.

Still, the truth was that the world she saw genuinely appeared enormous to her. Hers was a mild visual impairment paired with a severe cognitive deficiency. After eight long years, those deranged internal mechanisms finally clicked into place within a distorted system. She had never understood the distance that separated her from others. In a world that loomed over her even as it warped away into the distance, she cowered alone in terror, forever beyond anyone's comprehension.

Her impairment robbed her of any chance to perceive the world at its rightful scale. And that solitude was what ultimately led her down the devil's path. Instead of eradicating her disorder, her mutation ensured that others could finally taste the fear and torment she had endured all along.

"So this is the power of Double Bind, huh? The Possessed capable of splicing her cognitive impairment onto others' minds."

"Indeed. Sharing my perception was all I could do at first, but things are different now. If not, then I probably would've only ever killed one person. I needed to be a bit more creative to cripple every single one of my classmates."

She held her giant leg aloft.

To any bystander, the motion would have appeared as nothing more than an ordinary step. However, to Kanata, it was nothing short of a gargantuan nightmare bearing down upon her.

"I learned how to overwrite people's minds too. Didn't I tell you, princess? You might be better than me at breaking things, but you haven't even scratched the surface when it comes to manipulating the human mind!"

"Kh!"

A fifty-ton hallucination came crashing down.

Though Kanata attempted to evade it by leaping away, she couldn't manage to put an inch of distance between them. Her own body throttled her movements in lockstep with her altered perception. Even when attempting to leap ten metres back, all she managed was a retreat of the exact same distance in centimetres.

It was no wonder Ruzeru had broken so many spirits.

Kanata's body may have sustained no real damage, but lingering too long in this nightmare would drive anyone mad.

"You won't be able to run forever. Actually, how about I shrink you down even more?"

Her own perception had betrayed her.

The sovereign of her distorted mind raised her foot high overhead.

There was no escaping anymore. Though Kanata's consciousness should have been able to break out of Ruzeru's prison in an instant, her brain had already accepted this warped scale as the absolute truth.

This mental contagion was injected straight into the cerebrum via electrical signals. In other words, it was an inescapable form of brainwashing. No remedy existed save for being forcefully rousted by a third party.

Neither of them had any way of knowing it, but somewhere out there existed a Possessed capable of functioning even under the toll of similar impediments.

It would be some time yet before Ishizue Kanata crossed paths with her true polar opposite among the Possessed, Hinomori Shuusei—whose method of neutralising mental interference was the exact inverse of hers.

"Nope, I think I'm good. Might have needed another minute if this were my first time, but lucky me, I already had a pretty similar daydream last year."

She wouldn't run away from Hirumiya Ruzeru. No—there had never been any need to run in the first place. To Ishizue Kanata, her mutation had already become an object of the past.

"...Huh?"

A chill shot up Ruzeru's spine, coursing straight into her cerebrum.

She glanced up toward the voice drifting down from somewhere far above, suddenly doubting her own vision of reality. Her own impairment paled by comparison. After all, standing before her now was an Ishizue Kanata tall enough to brush the clouds.

"Sorry, but I can't really say I'm enjoying this."

The sky fell upon her.

This was no hallucination born out of her altered perception, but reality itself. And just like that, the right foot poised to crush Ruzeru out of existence came crashing down.

Rumble.

Crimson droplets sprayed outward as a violent tremor reverberated through the building, rattling it to its very core. To Hirumiya Ruzeru, who had her impairment amplified dozens-fold, that single impact was enough to shatter her reality—to shatter her entire world.

▪

Rumble.

When the dust settled over their fierce clash, Kuramitsu Meruka fell at Ms. Mato's hands, his midline caved in by a brutal five-hit combination.

Hooray, us!

"We just lucked out. I already knew about his symptoms beforehand. His mutation's the type you can deal with as long as you know the ins and outs. If we'd run into Propagating Entrails (Yashikido Kyouma) or Freezia (Yoruguchi Shishiya), I'd have had to bring out this little beauty."

The 'little beauty' in question was the rocket launcher riding on her shoulder. For the record, I was supposed to be trump card number one. The rocket launcher was trump card number two.

Leaving behind the body of the Ward D patient Kuramitsu Meruka, Ms. Mato made straight for the stairwell. I couldn't tell if someone had destroyed it or the power had simply cut out, but the elevator was completely dead.

Rumble.

Another inexplicable tremor rolled through the central ward. It was clearly coming from the first floor. Even from this height, the shockwaves were reaching us all the way up on the twenty-fifth floor. Heading down toward the lower floors was the absolute last thing I wanted to do, but Ms. Mato was already beckoning me forward.

"Hey, mind if I ask a stupid question?"

"Huh, the next signal's all the way down on the third floor. Sure, why not? I can humour you on the way there. Just don't waste too much of my time."

"Um so, like... I feel like you just dropped a buncha creepy stuff right now? What the heck is a Propagating Entrails? Oh, and Freezia too. Are those supposed to be nicknames of patients?"

"Well, uh, yes. J-Just so we're clear, I had no hand in coming up with those names. Here you go. Back when that thing was first brought here, it made a point of jotting everything it saw down in here."

She fished a small scrap of paper out of her breast pocket and handed it over.

I recognised the handwriting the instant I saw it. I'd seen those exact same scribbles plenty of times back when I used to help her with her homework—and there it was, a whole fresh battalion of spectacularly unhinged nicknames. She was probably around fourteen... no, fifteen at the time, I guess. Oh well, I should've seen that coming. Seriously, though, she was really laying it on a bit too thick. Then again, I suppose there are worse things for a kid to have than an overactive imagination.

Rumble.

Whoops. A tremor far stronger than the last rattled through the central ward, as though something below us had just lashed out at the building itself.

We were currently passing the twentieth floor. The smell of blood thickened with every floor we descended. In stark contrast to the upper floors, which had felt almost civilised by comparison, the lower floors had been thoroughly subjugated by the devils lurking within. A lifelike hue of pink tinged the walls, while the air was filled with the sweet scent of nectar. Every floor bore its own distinct scars of destruction. The twelfth floor, of which we'd caught only a passing glimpse through the stairwell, had its entire eastern wall erased from existence.

Honestly, I couldn't even fathom how anyone could scoop out a concrete wall that neatly without a bulldozer. After witnessing this level of devastation, I wouldn't have batted an eye if the monster suddenly went full kaiju-sized on us. If anything, the far more disturbing possibility was that it might still look perfectly human—it had already thrown the law of conservation of energy straight into a ditch anyway.

"Say, Ms. Mato."

The dread coiling behind my ribs forced the most important question out before I could choke it back down.

"Realistically speaking, do you think that rocket launcher can actually put a dent in her?"

If the answer was no, I was leaving on the spot. I'd find my way back to the rooftop and watch the kaiju duke it out from three thousand metres in the air.

"At least for now, it should. Or at least that's what I'd like to tell you, but honestly, it's a coin toss. If she's already revived from being completely pulverised sometime within the last six hours, then a rocket launcher might not even slow her down."

"The hell? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like. She's a Possessed with a resistance to everything in this world. I told you before, didn't I? We can't afford to kill her carelessly anymore. This whole mess started because somebody got careless, after all. Some half-wit medical staffer accidentally killed her by administering too much of a certain nerve gas."

"As much as I'm dying to cut in right now, I'll let you finish."

"Sure. It was a regrettable incident, but there was nothing they could do except make peace with it. But when they tried to take their minds off it by performing an autopsy, her corpse suddenly sprang back to life. Absurdly enough, even though her body showed no vital signs whatsoever, her brain was still operating independently. Since then, nerve agents of a similar composition stopped working on her altogether. Put simply, her body had figured out how to shut the door against dying the same way. I imagine you can see where this is going. Despite their initial surprise, everyone at Origa soon rejoiced at their sudden discovery. I mean, who wouldn't? After dying to

the toxin, her body instantly produced an antibody capable of counteracting it. They'd been handed a single specimen on which they could conduct every lethal experiment their minds could contrive. You couldn't engineer a more convenient test subject even if you tried."

Rumble.

We were drawing closer to the monster's pulse.

"Unfortunately, that excitement curdled into disappointment within the next month. They should've known better. Whatever was taking place inside her body had long since outstripped the boundaries of human biochemistry. Trying to translate any of it into practical medicine proved impossible from day one. Even though hundreds of experiments yielded no fruit, she herself was quietly stockpiling resistance to the same amount of deaths."

Rumble.

We made it to the fifth floor.

The sight was absolutely ghastly. The metallic reek wafting up from below was so thick it seemed to press against my face, making my head swim.

"Do you understand? Nothing in Origa's entire pharmacological arsenal can kill her anymore. That said, it's still not a completely lost cause. If push comes to shove, we can always feed her into a hydraulic press or blow her to pieces with a rocket launcher. The question is, what happens if even that doesn't work? If she comes back to life after being reduced to a heap of meat, we're screwed. We'd be physically, categorically incapable of putting her down. That possibility is what began haunting every Origa staffer's dreams. Therefore, as long as they were stationed here, they weren't about to let her reach that stage. They were certain they could still kill her, but one botched attempt would mark the point of no return. The thought gnawed at them: the classic horror scenario of accidentally shepherding an unkillable monster into existence. In the end, they arrived at the conclusion that she simply couldn't be allowed to die anymore. As things stand, there still exist deaths she hasn't yet experienced. That handed them a perfectly convenient escape hatch from having to confront what they had already set in motion. And as long as that remained true, she couldn't have crossed the threshold into true immortality. But regardless, she still

continued to grow with every passing day. Keeping her caged in the same facility indefinitely was never a sustainable plan. She was, in fact, the very reason they expanded Ward D six months ago. There was always the slim possibility that she'd simply live out her natural lifespan and die of old age. I suppose they were naively banking on the hope that, if they kept her locked away for the rest of her life, no one would ever be forced to answer for what they created."

Rumble. Rumble.

We finally arrived at the third floor. I couldn't take it anymore. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong. A lake had formed beneath the third floor. For some godforsaken reason, the entire first and second floors had been submerged in a sea of blood. It wasn't the sheer volume that made my skin crawl—it was the implication that whatever creature had carried this much blood in its body had already been ruthlessly put down by her.

"This floor's our only remaining route into Ward D. If I recall correctly, there should be an emergency staircase—"

Ms. Mato, for her part, wasn't showing so much as an ounce of fear. Watching her carry herself with that fearless composure, I began to wonder whether she was actually the one who lacked a sense of danger.

"No, we need to turn back! We've gotta get back to Shikura, Ms. Mato! It won't work! That second trump card of yours won't work, I'm sure of it!"

"Don't you dare mock the power of a rocket launcher, you dimwit! This thing is a bona fide work of art! Fortress walls, Type 90 tanks, hardened targets of every stripe! Nothing walks away from a direct hit by this beauty! The only thing that's got any business withstanding its might is a Tyrant!"

"Wh-what the?!"

Damn it, I should've realised it already. Ms. Mato had already lost her marbles! Like, ages ago!

"Move it, Shozai. Things will work out as long as I've got you by my side. You've heard of the shield and spear paradox before, I take it?"

"...!"

Seizing me by the collar with a battle cry, she hauled me forward.

While I scrambled along in terror, Ms. Mato strode through the ankle-deep blood-flooded hallway without so much as flinching. Before I could get my bearings, as though it'd been waiting for exactly that moment, the central ward bucked with a tremor more violent than any before it.

"Kh?!"

"She's here."

She said it like it was nothing. I had no *goddamn* idea how she could be so nonchalant.

Ten metres ahead of us, the wall collapsed into a roiling cloud of debris. It simply powdered apart, as though a dump truck had punched straight through it from the other side. A girl with long, sleek black hair stepped through, haloed by a drifting blood-haze and the first wash of dawn.

It was the first time in two whole years that I'd laid eyes on her.

She wasn't wearing the blood-soaked dress I remembered so vividly from that night. In fact, despite the utter bloodbath she'd just left behind, not a single speck of crimson marred her. Wearing a wide, radiant smile, the girl Touma Mato had once brought down and I had finished off now stood before us in a form that barely resembled the one preserved in my memory.

"Long time no see, hag. I've waited two whole years for this day, you know? Oh? And what might that look mean, brother dearest? You look so grossed out."

She opened up with a rather graceful greeting, displaying her newfound mental growth.

"....."

I swear to God, those videos hadn't come anywhere close to doing it justice. She'd grown too damn much!

"Shozai!"

Unfortunately, our tearful reunion didn't factor into Touma Mato's calculations in the slightest. The discrepancy in our strengths was insurmountable.

With her battle-hardened instincts, Ms. Mato had already judged that even a single disposable word would be enough to seal our fate.

We stood against ever-growing aptitudes.

Against ever-learning resistances.

Indeed, there was no creature on earth that had more right to be called a monster than her.

Our one shot at defeating her—no, to escape from her—lived and died within this singular moment. Ms Mato readied her rocket launcher in an attempt to defend me.

"Gee, hag. You're too slow."

Her voice rang out right beside us as she devoured the ten-metre gap in a blink. In the next instant, the monster's right fist drove forward with the devastating force of a pile driver. Capable of punching clean through six centimetres of solid iron, her fist mercilessly—

"Now, Shozai! Shield me!"

—mercilessly drove straight into my chest.

Cough.

"Oh shoot... It totally slipped my mind!"

As Ishizue Kanata froze in shock, Ms. Mato pulled the trigger on her second trump card.

Hrrrk. Garkhh. As blood continued to dribble downward, I finally realised why Ms. Mato had named her trump cards in ord—

◆◆◆

February 14th, 2005, 12:00 AM.

I opened my eyes through a haze, feeling a knot in my chest that I couldn't quite put into words.

"A dream, huh?"

Yeah, that's all it was. Granted, it was a nightmare uglier than anything I could've come up with on my own. There were plenty of implausible elements that didn't exactly stand up to reality, after all. Still, with all the heavy foreshadowing, I'd like to think the conclusion at least made enough sense.

"Dangerous shit stacked on top of dangerous shit every single year, man. Looks like February 14th's engraved itself in my memories as another traumatic day."

I clambered out of bed, idly rubbing the spot in my chest where I'd been run through in a dream mere moments ago. I washed my face to rinse off the last clinging dregs of the nightmare, and once I'd more or less pulled myself back together, I flicked on the TV for a change of pace.

The sky outside was sullen and overcast. A far cry from the sunrise in my dream, which had been beautiful enough to feel like a fairytale. But, oh well, I guess real life wasn't that pretty.

"Hm?"

My cell phone was going off, the screen displaying the caller ID 'Tomato'. If she ever laid eyes on that name, I couldn't hold it against her if she killed me. Ms. Mato had been my presiding officer since I left Origa, which meant she was obligated to check in with me once every four days. After that, we'd somehow always end up grabbing breakfast together at a place called Malion, right in front of my apartment. And short of divine intervention, there was basically no chance of her ever picking up the tab.

"Morning, Ms. Mato. Ishizue speaking."

"Shozai, I've got some bad news. I need you to listen very carefully to me. And don't lose your head."

Her voice over the phone carried a chilling blend of urgency and composure. She only ever used that specific tone when a point of absolute mortal peril had been reached. A wave of nausea rolled through me at the indescribable sense of déjà vu.

"Origa was destroyed early this morning. None of the wards made it through intact. Searches for patients and staff are currently underway, but the odds of anyone

having survived are absurdly slim. Best-case scenario, we're looking at one or two survivors at best. According to the surveillance footage, the entire incident was caused by the sole survivor. After slaughtering every single patient who attempted to escape, the suspect broke through the front entrance and brazenly walked out in plain view."

A bolt of electricity ran down my spine. The thought of getting hold of a passport and disappearing overseas crossed my mind immediately, but as someone classified as an Agonist Disorder patient, I didn't even have the right to a driver's licence.

"You understand what I'm getting at, don't you? We've thrown everything we have into tracking down the suspect, but they still haven't been taken into custody."

Origa was, for all intents and purposes, a shuttered island—a sealed room fuelled by electricity. It was impossible for anything to breach it from the outside world. Any disaster that took root there had to be homegrown, born and bred within its own walls. Origa's downfall could only ever have been an act of self-destruction. Which meant the only confirmed survivor had to be the very same person who had orchestrated everything.

"Shozai, Ishizue Kanata's out."

In other words, what I'd just dreamed was no ordinary nightmare.

It was a painful dream barbed with the fragments of a truth Ishizue Arika could never hope to escape.

/ Vt.in day dream.end

2005 Origa Cup: St.V's Ultimate Showdown Results

Ishizue Kanata

*Excluding anyone who didn't last three seconds because it'd be a pain to list them all.

Ward : Disease : Name : Result

D : ~~Celeer~~ Brainless -> Accepting suggestions : Ishizue Kanata : Undefeated

D : Propagating Entrails : Yashikido Kyouma : Easy win. Best match so far. Strongest Possessed in terms of size, just as his reputation suggests. Ten electrifying minutes, start to finish. Pretty sure my heart skipped a beat when I saw his final form.

D : Double Bind : Hirumiya Ruzeru : Tough win. Shared Cognitive Disability Almost didn't see it coming. Also, the name Ruzeru just pisses me off.

D : Amentia Nightmare : Yujumochi Arou : Win. Self-destructed after fusing with the first six floors of the central ward and all of C. Didn't have to do anything.

D : Freezia: Yoruguchi Shishiya : Overwhelming win. Ice Flower Doesn't matter if he can stop time.

D : Sea Turtle Style : Kotou Hamuru : Overwhelming win. Poison's lost its punch, with me, unfortunately.

E : Homewrecker's Dreamy Fucking Siesta : Origa Maiion : Default win. Was already dead in her own special room. What now?

D : Strongest NEET in the Galaxy : Ookumaneko Mokumoku : Partial win. Super strong. Super unassailable. Barely squeaked past.

D : Klein Cube Clearness : Kuramitsu Meruka : Inescapable Pitfall of the Brain Technical win. Chronic defeatist. Wussed out and escaped inside me like a pansy, so I couldn't finish him off. I won't let him escape though. RIP.

C : Ms. Lawnmower : Yamanashi Tomori : Default win. She surrendered, so I tossed her into an underground cage and caved the passage in. Might still be alive if she escaped in time.

C : Grocer of Assaulting Orders : Nirasishi Yutaka : Overwhelming win. Marble Fumble Market Has a strange reputation as a former charismatic salesman. Loves to expose people's weaknesses and traumas.

C : Sunny Day Raincoat : Yuzuriha Namida : Overwhelming win. Not into girls who use curses. Cleared the weather up right away.

C : Voice Eraser : Makotoko Mio : Easy win. Sings too much. Hope she doesn't end up with polyps. Track 3

B : Yamada β: Umikaze Tachino : Overwhelming win. My very first opponent. A good warm-up, I guess?

B : Bizarre Projection : Miyahara Mumei : Easy win. A wannabe Hisaori, Tribute Anthology but a fun three minutes. Kinda wish it had lasted a minute longer.

B : Moon Lute of the Heart : Arishino Rikka : Easy win. Air yuegin. Her rapid-fire solo stirred some... okay, a lot of emotions in me. Heard she's the Possessed with the highest body count. Did she seriously kill ten thousand people up north?

A : Nothing in particular : Hinomori Ouka : Super easy win. Took just about three seconds. No mutation, but had a katana for some reason ...Wait a sec, was she... actually the strongest enemy in Origa this whole time?

You've gotta be kidding me...